

OLD ENGLISH ENIGMATIC POEMS
AND THE PLAY OF THE TEXTS

STUDIES IN THE EARLY MIDDLE AGES

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VOLUME 13

OLD ENGLISH ENIGMATIC POEMS
AND THE PLAY OF THE TEXTS

by

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BREPOLS

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Saturn said:

What is that speechless thing
at rest in a hollow, rapt in thought?

It has seven tongues. Each tongue has twenty tips. Each of those tips
contains the wisdom of an angel. Just one of those tongues will lift you up
until you see the walls of Jerusalem
golden, gleaming. —Guess what I mean.

Solomon said:

Books are far-famed. They often proclaim
good things in store for people who cultivate their mind.

They strengthen your wits and confirm your faith.

They free your head from everyday dumps and distractions
and bliss you out.

—*Solomon and Saturn II*, lines 229–42 (slightly adapted)

CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	ix
List of Abbreviations	xi
List of Illustrations	xv
Introduction: Old English Poems and Current Readers	i
Chapter 1. Exeter Book Riddle 74 and the Play of the Text	ii
Footnote: Getting the Exeter Book Right	57
Chapter 2. Exeter Book Riddle 55: Some Gallows Humour	61
Chapter 3. New Answers to Exeter Book Riddles 36, 58, 70, and 75/76	85
Chapter 4. Answering the Riddles in their Own Tongue	101
Appendix: Exeter Book Riddle Solutions in Old English	141
Chapter 5. The Problem of the Ending of <i>The Wife's Lament</i>	149
Addendum: More on Curses in the Northern World	209
Chapter 6. The Trick of the Runes in <i>The Husband's Message</i>	213

Chapter 7. Runic Hermeneutics in <i>The Rune Poem</i>	251
Addendum: A Bonus Ship	281
Chapter 8. Cynewulf's Use of Initialisms in his Runic Signatures	285
Conclusion: On the Dance of Wit and Wisdom	307
Index of Old English Words and Phrases Discussed	311
Index of Old English Works and Passages	313
Index of Modern Scholars Cited	319
General Index	325

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which short versions of certain chapters were aired for discussion are mentioned in the notes.

It is impossible to offer thanks here to the many persons who have stimulated my thoughts with their questions, comments, and criticisms over the past years. Some of those individuals have been anonymous readers of my work; many others are cited by name at appropriate points in the following pages. I am grateful to them all for their collegial interest and support. Expert editorial assistance was provided by Clare Orchard for the two articles published in *Anglo-Saxon England*, by Jacqueline Brown for the article published in *Speculum*, and by Deborah A. Oosterhouse for the present volume. My project assistant at UW-Madison, Brian O'Camb, has provided invaluable help.

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I have a lasting debt to my wife, Carole Newlands, who has earned my gratitude for her loving support as I have worked on this volume despite the demands of her own professional life. This book is dedicated to her.

ABBREVIATIONS

Standard abbreviations not included in the following list are based on the *MHRA Style Book* (London: Modern Humanities Research Association, 1996).

<i>ASE</i>	<i>Anglo-Saxon England</i>
ASPR	The Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records, ed. by George Philip Krapp and Elliott Van Kirk Dobbie, 6 vols (New York, 1931–42)
<i>ASSAH</i>	<i>Anglo-Saxon Studies in Archaeology and History</i>
Bammesberger	<i>Old English Runes and their Continental Background</i> , ed. by A. Bammesberger (Heidelberg, 1991)
<i>Biblia sacra</i>	<i>Biblia sacra juxta vulgatam versionem</i> , ed. by Robert Weber, 4th edn, ed. by Roger Gryson (Stuttgart, 1994)
<i>Blackwell Encyclopaedia</i>	<i>The Blackwell Encyclopaedia of Anglo-Saxon England</i> , ed. by Michael Lapidge and others (Oxford, 1999)
Bosworth and Toller, or B-T	James Bosworth and T. Northcote Toller, <i>An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary</i> (Oxford, 1898), with <i>Supplement</i> by T. N. Toller (1921) and <i>Revised and Enlarged Addenda</i> by A. Campbell (1972)
CCCC	Cambridge, Corpus Christi College
Cleasby and Vigfusson	Richard Cleasby, <i>An Icelandic-English Dictionary</i> , rev. by Gudbrand Vigfusson, 2nd edn (Oxford, 1957)

Corpus of Old English	The Dictionary of Old English Corpus in Electronic Form; an on-line publication of the <i>DOE</i>
Dobbie	<i>The Anglo-Saxon Minor Poems</i> , ed. by Elliott Van Kirk Dobbie, ASPR, 6 (New York, 1942)
<i>DOE</i>	<i>Dictionary of Old English</i> , ed. by Antonette diPaolo Healey and others (Toronto, 1986–), letters A–F (currently available on microfiches or CD-ROM)
EETS	Early English Text Society
<i>ES</i>	<i>English Studies</i>
the Exeter Book facsimile	<i>The Exeter Book of Old English Poetry</i> , with introductory chapters by R. W. Chambers, Max Förster, and Robin Flower (London, 1933)
Fulk and Cain	R. D. Fulk and Christopher M. Cain, <i>A History of Old English Literature</i> (Oxford, 2003)
Halsall	<i>The Old English Rune Poem: A Critical Edition</i> , ed. by Maureen Halsall (Toronto, 1981)
<i>JAF</i>	<i>Journal of American Folklore</i>
<i>JEGP</i>	<i>Journal of English and Germanic Philology</i>
Klinck	Anne L. Klinck, <i>The Old English Elegies: A Critical Edition and Genre Study</i> (Montreal, 1992; repr. 2001)
Krapp and Dobbie, or K-D	<i>The Exeter Book</i> , ed. by George Philip Krapp and Elliott Van Kirk Dobbie, ASPR, 3 (New York, 1936)
<i>MÆ</i>	<i>Medium Ævum</i>
<i>Medieval England</i>	<i>Medieval England: An Encyclopedia</i> , ed. by Paul E. Szarmach, M. Teresa Tavormina, and Joel T. Rosenthal (New York, 1998)
<i>Medieval Scandinavia</i>	<i>Medieval Scandinavia: An Encyclopedia</i> , ed. by Philip Pulsiano and Kirsten Wolf (New York, 1993)
<i>MLN</i>	<i>Modern Language Notes</i>

<i>MPh</i>	<i>Modern Philology</i>
Muir, or M	<i>The Exeter Anthology of Old English Poetry</i> , ed. by Bernard J. Muir, 2nd edn, 2 vols (Exeter, 2000)
<i>N&Q</i>	<i>Notes and Queries</i>
<i>Neoph</i>	<i>Neophilologus</i>
<i>NM</i>	<i>Neuphilologische Mitteilungen</i>
OE	Old English
<i>OED</i>	<i>The Oxford English Dictionary</i> , 2nd edn (Oxford, 1989)
Page	R. I. Page, <i>An Introduction to English Runes</i> , 2nd edn (Woodbridge, 1999)
<i>PMLA</i>	<i>Publications of the Modern Language Association of America</i>
<i>PQ</i>	<i>Philological Quarterly</i>
Sawyer	P. H. Sawyer, <i>Anglo-Saxon Charters: An Annotated List and Bibliography</i> (London, 1968)
<i>SN</i>	<i>Studia Neophilologica</i>
<i>SPh</i>	<i>Studies in Philology</i>
Toller	T. Northcote Toller, <i>Supplement to An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary Based on the Manuscript Collections of Joseph Bosworth</i> (Oxford, 1921)
Tupper	<i>The Riddles of the Exeter Book</i> , ed. by Frederick Tupper, Jr (Boston, MA, 1910)
Williamson, or W	<i>The Old English Riddles of the Exeter Book</i> , ed. by Craig Williamson (Chapel Hill, 1977)
<i>ZfdA</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für deutsches Altertum und deutsche Literatur</i>

ILLUSTRATIONS

- p. 72 Figure 1. Hanged man, showing a rudimentary gallows. London, British Library, Cotton MSS, Claudius B IV, fol. 59^r (detail). By permission.
- p. 76 Figure 2. Byrnie from Vimose bog, Denmark. The National Museum, Copenhagen. By permission.
- p. 79 Figure 3. Procession with cart and weapons. Detail from the Bayeux Tapestry, eleventh century. By special permission of the City of Bayeux.
- p. 82 Figure 4. Domestic loom from Lyngen, northern Norway. Haakon Schetelig and Hjalmar Falk, *Scandinavian Archaeology*, trans. by E. V. Gordon (Oxford, 1937), plate 55 (after p. 334).
- p. 98 Figure 5. Exeter Book Riddle 75/76. Exeter, Cathedral Library, MS 3501, fol. 127^r. By permission of the Dean and Chapter of Exeter Cathedral.
- p. 217 Figure 6. The beginning of *The Husband's Message*. Exeter, Cathedral Library, MS 3501, fol. 123^r. By permission of the Dean and Chapter of Exeter Cathedral.
- p. 218 Figure 7. The ending of *The Husband's Message* showing embedded runes and rune-like characters. Exeter, Cathedral Library, MS 3501, fol. 123^v. By permission of the Dean and Chapter of Exeter Cathedral.
- p. 237 Figure 8. Facsimile of the first printed edition of *The Rune Poem*. George Hickes, *Linguarum Veterum Septentrionalium Thesaurus* (Oxford, 1703), p. 135. Cambridge University Library.

OLD ENGLISH POEMS AND CURRENT READERS

Old English poetry presents its readers with a strenuous challenge. Although approximately thirty thousand lines of verse dating from the Anglo-Saxon period (c. AD 450–1066) happen to survive, very few can be ascribed to a known author. Even in those rare instances when personal authorship is known, as with the four poems signed by ‘Cynewulf’, it may be that nothing is known about that person other than his name, so that he may weigh in no more heavily on the scales of material existence than those bodiless figures ‘the *Beowulf* poet’ or ‘the author of *The Wanderer*’. Author-centred approaches to the poetry of this period are therefore not to be contemplated, whatever may be true of later ages that have lionized the poet as hero.¹ One wonders if, as unintended readers of this early poetry,² we are like persons who find themselves accidental eavesdroppers on a discussion that is already underway, between unknown numbers of unseen persons, about topics only some of which are likely to make sense to us today.

In its manuscript form, moreover, Old English poetry is not even clearly marked out as verse. Unlike the Latin poetry of this period, it is written continuously like prose, with no titles. One is left wondering if its reception in its own

¹ Mary Swan, ‘Authorship and Anonymity’, in *A Companion to Anglo-Saxon Literature*, ed. by Phillip Pulsiano and Elaine Treharne (Oxford, 2001), pp. 71–83, discusses the implications of the fact that a good deal of Old English literature cannot be ascribed to a known author, as does Carol Braun Pasternack, *The Textuality of Old English Poetry* (Cambridge, 1995), esp. pp. 12–21.

² By referring to modern readers as ‘unintended’ ones from the perspective of the authors of Old English texts, I am adopting a phrase that is used to good effect by Andreas Haarder in *Beowulf: The Appeal of a Poem* (Viborg, 1975). Haarder thus reminds his readers that whoever this poetry was meant for, those people could not have been like us, nor could their literary expectations have been comparable to ours.

time must therefore have been very different from its reception by modern readers, who are likely to think of poetry as an art form defined by the white space that sets it off in isolation on the page. Old English poetry is highly rhythmic when read out loud, but rhythm is an aural quality, not a visual one. The first thing that current readers of this poetry ought to do, it seems, is to shut their eyes and open their ears to the flow of words. But as soon as one has done that, the intrusion of an odd visual symbol on the manuscript page — a runestave, for instance, set into the matrix of normal script — jars that mood and reminds us that Old English poetry can also be a carefully crafted material thing.

To compound these difficulties, very few poems from this period can be firmly dated. Although experts in palaeography can judge fairly precisely when a manuscript text was written down and might even be able to infer the scriptorium where it was written, there can be no assurance that the act of writing a text had any relation to that work's date of composition. Moreover, the distinction between original *composition* and mechanical *reproduction* that is taken for granted in our age of print and legal copyright is only partially applicable to the early medieval context. Often one can only guess what a scribal text represents in relation to its imagined exemplar — or can we be sure there was an exemplar, if the text exists in only a single anonymous copy, as is usual with the poetry? Perhaps one reason we do not know the names of many Anglo-Saxon authors is that the author-function then was more of a shifting, communal thing than it is today.

For all these reasons, the social function of Old English poetry is generally unknown. In order to determine the social function of a literary work, one normally requires knowledge of the relationship between authors and readers (or between performers and listeners) in one or another real-life setting. When we turn to the Anglo-Saxon period, such relationships are almost impossible to discern. Although most of the texts that were written down during this era were preserved in monastic libraries and, one assumes, were copied out by the clergy for the benefit of the clergy, it would be rash to conclude, without further information, that a particular Old English poem was intended primarily for a clerical audience. After all, scribes were craftsmen. Some of them worked in the service of the lay aristocracy just as goldsmiths and armourers did.

In any event, little is to be gained by making an 'either/or' distinction between the clergy and the laity. As R. D. Fulk and Christopher M. Cain have emphasized in their recent *History of Old English Literature*, 'there is massive evidence for the secular qualities of the early Anglo-Saxon Church',³ and such a

³ Fulk and Cain, p. 201, writing with reference to several studies by the late Patrick Wormald with a bearing on this point.

statement is not without validity as regards the later Church as well. Almost by definition, members of Anglo-Saxon monastic houses had to have come from lay backgrounds. Some monasteries maintained important ties with lay patrons. The whole body of the secular clergy served the needs of persons in all walks of life. In like manner, the laity scarcely lived in isolation from the Church and from Christian doctrine. The high ranks of the aristocracy had their household priests and, on state occasions, their attendant bishops. Everyone in society was accustomed to the language of the sermons and rites that bound the members of a community together. When pious lay people thought about religious matters, they naturally adopted the language and mentality of the Church. All extant Old English poetry is therefore religious poetry, at least in the sense that it was composed and copied out by persons who had integrated the basic concepts of Christianity into their mode of thought and perception, whatever else may have occupied their lives.

Looking at the bare text of a poem, then, how can one tell what it represents in terms of performance and audience? Was this text meant to be sounded aloud in a communal setting (in shorthand diction, 'the hall') where a common cultural heritage was celebrated and where the traditional values of a people, and particularly of its ruling class, were invoked and reinforced? Alternatively, was the text meant to be read in a sequestered setting ('the cloister') where a single learned person might have had a unique response to the private experience of reading it? Here is another 'either/or' model that should be questioned, for both these modes of reception — whether we think of them in terms of the hall versus the cloister, or the oral versus the written, or the Beowulfian versus the Alcuinian — could have come into play at different times and in a variety of different ways or combinations, depending on the life history of a poem.⁴

Adding spice to these problems of social function and reception is the problem of stylistic obscurity. Notoriously, some Old English poets concealed their intentions through a smokescreen of metaphor, ambiguity, and allusion. Some authors employed cryptography. One of the pleasures of reading Old English

⁴ Hugh Magennis, 'Audience(s), Reception, Literacy', in *Companion to Anglo-Saxon Literature*, ed. by Pulsiano and Treharne, pp. 84–101, notes that an awareness of multiple possible audiences for a given literary work 'might help us to avoid reductionist and oversimplified views of the meaning of Old English literature in its period' (p. 85). In 'Date, Provenance, Author, Audiences', in *A Beowulf Handbook*, ed. by Robert E. Bjork and John D. Niles (Lincoln, NE, 1997), pp. 13–34, Robert E. Bjork and Anita Obermeier depart from precedent in speaking explicitly of the 'audiences' of *Beowulf*, in the plural.

verse is that its obscurantism is not restricted to those places where one most expects to find it, as in the riddles of the Exeter Book. Rather, its presence here and there throughout the Anglo-Saxon poetic corpus can convert virtually any text into a playground of subterfuge and wit.

To return to my starting point, Old English poetry presents its current readers with a daunting challenge. The more obscure Old English poems, which for us today are often the more interesting ones, were meant to be enjoyed by some kind of Anglo-Saxon cognoscenti — that is, by persons ‘in the know’. But how, today, can we be such persons?

The Design and Scope of This Book

In the following pages, I try to ascertain what can be achieved by the close study of a few discrete Old English verse texts, most of which are preserved in unique copies in the anthology known as the Exeter Book. All of these texts are enigmatic. Some are riddles; others are riddle-like in their manner of simultaneously giving and withholding information. A number of them feature the literary use of runes. I approach these poems as microcosms of the art of Old English poetry in general, which (particularly in its more lyrical forms) relies on its audience’s ability to decipher metaphorical language, to fill out many details that remain unexpressed, and to savour whatever satisfaction resides in the solving of upscale crossword puzzles.

My chief claim is that Old English poetry is a good deal more playful than is often acknowledged, so that the art of interpreting it can require a kind of ‘game strategy’ whereby riddling authors match their wits against adventurous readers who are always hoped to be up to the task. Whether or not a text is overtly playful, however, the act of reading it demands attention not only to the possible nuances of meaning of every word, but also to the spaces where no words are written and no story is told. This is true of some texts more than others, of course, but they tend to be the ones that excite most interest today. When read as a dramatic monologue composed in alliterative verse rather than as a woman’s unmediated expression of grief, even such an elegiac poem as *The Wife’s Lament* has a ludic aspect to it, something akin to the quality of a ‘guessing game’ whereby the reader is invited to fill in the speaker’s full, desolate history on the basis of a few hints and allusions. Such poems remind us that even a tragedy is a play. As for the poems of Cynewulf that I will touch on only very selectively, it has been observed that even *Christ II*, a poem that no one is likely

to call ‘playful’, includes language that is ‘strongly and appropriately reminiscent of OE riddling diction’.⁵

While the individual poems that are singled out for discussion in the following chapters constitute a very small part of the whole body of Old English verse, they are still characteristic of that corpus. Taken together, therefore, the parts of this book represent a modest individual contribution to the task (which must be a collective and ongoing one) of ascertaining the nature of Old English poetry. To an important extent, what this task requires is *reimagining* that poetry, for it would be absurd for current readers to respond to it other than in terms that make sense in our own era. So as to avoid what has been called the ‘rank pit’ of solipsism, however, the interpretation of Old English poems must also be anchored in a sound understanding of the intellectual and social milieu in which these works were produced. My guiding principle as a specialist in the Anglo-Saxon period is that when the power of insight that strong imagination can provide is conjoined with a sound knowledge of language, social history, and material culture, then the art of literary hermeneutics has at least a chance of partial success.

A more detailed synopsis of the book may be helpful.

In each of the following chapters, I accept the challenge offered to readers of Old English poems either literally to ‘guess my name’ (as with the riddles of the Exeter Book or the individual runes of *The Rune Poem*, *The Husband’s Message*, or Cynewulf’s runic signatures) or, more generally, to ‘fill out my story’ (as with such self-consciously enigmatic texts as *The Wife’s Lament* and *The Husband’s Message*). I see what can be accomplished by accepting a contest of wits with unknown authors who may give out clues as to what constitutes an acceptable ‘solution’ to a poem or a small textual puzzle, but who deliberately refrain from telling readers all that they may need to know for its interpretation. As well as offering new readings of a fair number of poems and passages, I also address (in the chapter on Riddle 74, in particular) the question of what makes for validity in interpretation when reading works like these. A point that is raised more than once, especially in the chapter on ‘Answering the Riddles in their Own Tongue’, is that the interpretation of the vernacular literature that dates from the Anglo-Saxon period should, if possible, be grounded in the vocabulary (and hence in the conceptual world) of the native English-speakers of that era.

For the most part, the study of prose falls outside the scope of this book. Despite my strong commitment to the concurrent study of verse and prose, Old

⁵ David F. Johnson, ‘Riddles, Old English’, in *Medieval England*, pp. 642–43 (p. 642 col. 2).

English verse has its own integrity, and I have wanted to focus attention there. At the same time, the benefits of studying poetry and prose in conjunction with one another ought to be self-evident. When a given poetic text is singled out for discussion, it is therefore sometimes approached with reference to sermons, charters, laws, chronicles, and other prose documents from the Anglo-Saxon period. Where appropriate, reference is made to related works from Latin and Old Norse tradition. Evidence drawn from other disciplines (including archaeology, anthropology, comparative literature, and comparative folklore and mythology) is cited when it is thought to be relevant. One of the joys of Anglo-Saxon studies is that there could scarcely be a more interdisciplinary field — and this is true chiefly because of the inherent nature of that field, I believe, and not because of any ostentatious commitment to the cause of interdisciplinary studies on the part of those who specialize in it.

In general, my engagement with ‘the play of the texts’ in this volume is meant to serve as a counterpart to the analysis of the social dimension of Old English heroic verse that I undertake in a companion volume to be published by Brepols as volume 20 in this same series.⁶

A Word on Methods

It is my hope that, despite the variety of its contents, this book will be found to have sufficient thematic unity to justify its publication. At the same time, such unity as it possesses does not depend solely on its engagement with a type of enigmatic poetry that is particularly characteristic of the Exeter Book. Its unity also derives from its *modus operandi*, its manner of enquiry. Through hindsight, I would identify the following critical methods as having been crucial to my research. While there is nothing original about these methods, they are perhaps important enough to merit being stated explicitly, phrased in the time-honoured mode of ‘advice to younger critics’.

1. *Read the text.* This point cannot be overstated, no matter how obvious it may seem. Read every word of the text, every letter, every space. Read *through* current editions of the text rather than simply accepting their claims to authority. Look at how the text is presented in its manuscript context; see if its letters are proud and erect or are crowded together like rumpled clothing.

⁶ *Old English Poetry and the Social Life of Texts*, Studies in the Early Middle Ages, 20 (Turnhout, forthcoming).

Consult the best available dictionaries for each word that might be of special interest, and be prepared to read the dictionaries, too, with a critical eye. Then, and only then, are you likely to be in a position to perceive the shimmering leaves of the *bōc* 'book' that is also a *bōc* 'beech'. Of course, rather than being pleased with your own 'new' insights, you might simply end up impressed with how perceptive the scholars who have preceded you have been.

2. *Contemplate the text in its period-specific context.* Think of that text not in terms of a well-wrought Grecian urn, but rather in terms of an East Anglian clay pot or — perhaps more aptly, if it is poetry — a piece of Anglo-Saxon ornamental metalwork. The pot or ornament had a function; maybe so too did the poem. Why was this work thought important enough to be copied out on valuable parchment? To what aspects of real life did it relate? Suddenly, when contemplating a riddle that purports to be about some strange and exotic thing, you may come up with a solution that relates to an ordinary household.

3. *Know what your assumptions are.* As the Greek presocratic philosopher Thales is said to have said, γνῶθι σ'αὐτόν: know thyself.⁷ Know where you are coming from. Moreover, don't just know what your assumptions are; see what will happen if, for the sake of argument, you question them. Turn the text around three and a quarter times and try looking at it from another angle. Maybe your original perceptions will be confirmed, but perhaps they will not be, and then you are on the track of something interesting! Blink your eyes, and an object that you had thought was no bigger than a rune-stick towers up high, like a ship's mast. Being aware of one's assumptions and biases will not guarantee valid insights into literary problems, but it might lead to the discovery that certain ideas with which one had been living comfortably deserve sharper scrutiny. A path leading to new insights may thereby be discovered.

These, then, are three fundamental principles of criticism that I have tried to honour in this book: to *read closely*, to *contextualize in period-specific terms* whatever is being read, and to *interrogate one's own assumptions*. I do not for a moment suppose that these principles are unique to this work, nor do I flatter myself that personally, I succeed in abiding by them more than half the time.

⁷ *Diogenes Laertius: Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, ed. and trans. by R. D. Hicks, 2 vols (London, 1972), I, 40.

More than once, predictably, I have discovered that the path of research that I have adopted, and that I have even been as vain as to think that I had discovered, has been trail-blazed by other scholars. With some frequency, those persons have turned out to be German-speaking scholars of the golden age of academic achievement that preceded the disaster of World War I. In such instances I have followed in those scholars' footsteps, up to a point. I have also tried not to be misled by those tracks. If, upon reflection, I have found it necessary to adopt a different view of a particular question, then a frequent reason for that state of affairs has been that those outstanding scholars of an earlier generation were working under assumptions that, in more recent times, have rightly been superseded.

Something similar may happen when enlightened scholars of a future generation look back upon the chapters included in this book, if any should wish to do so. It will be interesting then, for those who are present, to see what new discoveries about Old English poetry can be made when yet different foundational assumptions are entertained.

How This Book Is Organized, and What Has Been Done to its Contents

Five of the following eight chapters have not appeared in print before. These are the ones titled 'Exeter Book Riddle 55: Some Gallows Humour', 'New Answers to Exeter Book Riddles 36, 58, 70, and 75/76', 'Answering the Riddles in their Own Tongue', 'Runic Hermeneutics in *The Rune Poem*', and 'Cynewulf's Use of Initialisms in his Runic Signatures'. In addition, of course, the sections labeled 'Footnote', 'Appendix', and 'Addendum' are new to this volume.

In reading a book that includes both something old and something new, readers may wish to know how extensively the work that was published before has been revised. Although each of those three chapters represents a special case, the following generalizations can be made.

The chapters have been unified into a single house style. Cross-references increase the book's coherence. A few redundancies have been eliminated, chiefly through the deletion of citations given elsewhere in the volume. Certain passages have been rephrased or slightly augmented in the interest of greater clarity or precision. On the other hand, a few cuts and rearrangements have been made as well. A section on Cynewulf's runic signatures has been excised from the chapter on *The Husband's Message* so as to be transplanted into chapter 8, which addresses that topic more systematically. For the benefit of non-specialist readers, occasional pointers have been given to reference books published during the past

ten years, including *Medieval England: An Encyclopedia* (1998) and *The Blackwell Encyclopaedia of Anglo-Saxon England* (1999). In instances where I have become conscious of having inadequately characterized the work of another scholar, I have been grateful for the opportunity to correct that injustice. An example is a study by A. N. Doane on *The Wife's Lament* to which I had alluded in my article on that poem, but without mentioning his pertinent remarks on the theme of cursing. In general there seemed to be no reason to confuse readers or baffle reviewers by grafting new ideas into the texture of old essays, and so the three chapters that have been published before remain essentially as they were, with such minor revisions as have been noted.

Handling of Citations, Long Vowels, Prose Texts, and Ellipses

Exeter Book poems are normally quoted from Muir's edition but sometimes from the edition by Krapp and Dobbie, as is noted in each chapter. Other Old English verse with the exception of *Beowulf* is normally cited from the appropriate volume of ASPR. Citations of *Beowulf* are from Klaeber's edition, minus the diacritics. When a text is quoted from an edition other than these, that fact is noted at that place. For the sake of ease in comparative research, the riddles of the Exeter Book are numbered according to the ASPR system; in a table on pp. 141–48, that system is collated with ones employed in two other recent editions. Translations of Old English texts, as well as all other translations, are my own unless stated otherwise.

My practice as regards the marking of long vowels should be explained. When individual Old English words or short phrases are discussed, long vowels are marked as such. In quotations longer than a verse or two, they are left unmarked, just as they normally appear in the editions from which these quotations are made.

My editorial handling of passages of Old English prose also calls for brief comment. As specialists will be aware, the readers of standard editions of Old English prose texts are faced with a bewildering variety of editorial practices. As Donald Scragg has remarked (thinking of prose texts in particular), 'it is shameful that there should be so little measure of agreement of practice between standard editions'.⁸ Some editors of prose texts are scrupulous about reproducing scribal punctuation, which differs from modern English usage in significant

⁸ D. G. Scragg, 'Postscript: *Quo Vadis, Editio?*', in *The Editing of Old English*, ed. by D. G. Scragg and Paul E. Szarmach (Cambridge, 1994), pp. 299–309 (p. 308).

ways. Others prefer to use a normalized system of punctuation based on one or another current standard. Some editors expand standard abbreviations while others do not. For the convenience of non-specialist readers as well as for the sake of consistency, I happen to concur with Helmut Gneuss and some other leading authorities concerning the benefits of normalizing the punctuation of prose,⁹ just as I accept the standard system (that is, the ASPR system) of normalizing Old English verse. I therefore offer my apologies to the editors of certain prose texts (including, significantly, the works of Ælfric, which have recently been re-edited to the enduring benefit of the scholarly world) for having normalized the punctuation of those texts when quoting them here. Where I have chosen to depart from the text of a scholarly edition so as to make that text more readily accessible to readers with professional competence in areas other than Old English philology, it is only in regard to capitalization, punctuation, and the use of abbreviations; and when changes of this kind have been made, that fact is stated. A special case is the tyronian *nota 7*, which is silently expanded to *ond* in keeping with ASPR practice.

When excerpting a passage from a verse text, I have occasionally not bothered to insert ellipses at the beginning or end of the quotation, for with the poetry, distinguishing what constitutes a separate clause is often both a problematic issue and an inconsequential one.¹⁰ This practice is followed only where it makes no difference to the sense.

While it is presumptuous to think that the texts discussed in this book (or its projected companion volume) will ever find adequate explication in the language of modern critical paraphrase, the task of humanistic scholarship is to engage with those texts and their meanings as closely as can be done. This task should be undertaken while making use of the best tools and methods that are presently available. It should be conducted in a spirit of humility at the inadequacies of one's training, the blind spots of one's scholarly discipline or generation, and the opacity of one's own powers of perception. Always, also, it should be undertaken with a strong effort to reimagine Old English poems as highly creative works of the literary imagination, worthy of attention for their wit as well as their wisdom.

⁹ Helmut Gneuss, 'Old English Texts and Modern Readers: Notes on Editing and Textual Criticism', in *Words and Works: Studies in Medieval English Language and Literature in Honour of Fred C. Robinson*, ed. by Peter S. Baker and Nicholas Howe (Toronto, 1998), pp. 127–41 (at p. 136).

¹⁰ As has been remarked of *The Wanderer*, 'It is frequently impossible to tell whether clauses are dependent or independent, especially those beginning with *þonne*, which may mean either "when" or "then"' (Fulk and Cain, p. 184).

EXETER BOOK RIDDLE 74 AND THE PLAY OF THE TEXT

Riddle 74 is one of a handful of Old English riddles of the Exeter Book (Exeter, Cathedral Library, MS 3501, fols 8–130) that have stubbornly resisted a solution.¹ As Bruce Mitchell and Fred C. Robinson have remarked, ‘scholars have suggested answers [...] but none satisfies all the conditions set forth in the poem’.² Peter Clemones finds the attributes that are ascribed to this particular riddle-subject to be ‘so paradoxical that it seems impossible to

¹ For concise accounts of the manuscript, see Donald Scragg, ‘The Exeter Book’, in *Blackwell Encyclopaedia*, pp. 177–78, and Alexander Rumble, ‘The Exeter Book’, in *Medieval England*, pp. 285–86. Scragg dates the book to c. 975. Rumble dates it somewhat earlier to ‘ca. 950–70?’. For information with a possible bearing on the manuscript’s early history, see Patrick W. Conner, *Anglo-Saxon Exeter: A Tenth-Century Cultural History* (Woodbridge, Suffolk, 1993), esp. pp. 48–94 (on the palaeographical context) and pp. 95–147 (on codicology) and, with some differences of opinion that need not concern us here, Richard Gameson, ‘The Origin of the Exeter Book of Old English Poetry’, *ASE*, 25 (1996), 135–85. The riddle discussed in the present chapter is no. 74 in Krapp and Dobbie, no. 72 in Williamson. Other editions that I have consulted (in addition to the Exeter Book facsimile) are *Codex Exoniensis*, ed. by Benjamin Thorpe (London, 1842); Tupper; *Old English Riddles*, ed. by A. J. Wyatt (Boston, 1912); *Die altenglischen Rätsel*, ed. by Moritz Trautmann (Heidelberg, 1915); *The Exeter Book*, pt 2, ed. by W. S. Mackie, EETS OS, 194 (Oxford, 1934); F. H. Whitman, *Old English Riddles* (Ottawa, 1982); Hans Pinsker and Waltraud Ziegler, *Die altenglischen Rätsel des Exeterbuchs* (Heidelberg, 1985); and Muir. I am indebted to Andy Orchard, Donald Scragg, and John Lindow for advice on specific points relating to this chapter.

² Bruce Mitchell and Fred C. Robinson, *A Guide to Old English*, 5th edn (Oxford, 1992), p. 240. In the sixth edition of the *Guide* (Oxford, 2001), p. 240, these experts adopt a different stance and accept Donoghue’s ‘barnacle goose’ as the solution (see pp. 22–23 below).

name their possessor at all'.³ Riddles normally do have answers, however, and this one is no exception. My first aim in this chapter is to offer an answer to Riddle 74 that will put debate to rest as to its intended solution.

Ascertaining the answer to the riddle is not my only purpose, however. Like almost any short specimen of Old English verse, Riddle 74 can be used as a lever by which large objects may be moved. A second aim of this chapter is to assess the criteria for validity in interpretation, both in regard to the literary riddle (as opposed to social riddling) and as a general problem in human understanding. The question of how to determine linguistic meaning in general, I shall claim, can be clarified using Riddle 74 as a test case. A third aim of this chapter is to examine the ludic qualities of the Exeter Book riddles and, by extension, of poetry of other kinds. I will suggest that there is reason to regard poetry in general, not just in the Anglo-Saxon context, as a species of play, a special type of extended riddling. Finally, approaching Riddle 74 as a microcosm, I will suggest that the corpus of Old English riddles provides a useful vantage point for examining the world view of the Anglo-Saxons. Through their bold use of metaphor, the riddles play with conceptual categories and habits of thought that were taken for granted in the culture of their time.⁴ Although my topic is only five lines of verse, it therefore involves questions of some magnitude.

Text, Translations, and Imagined Solutions

The manuscript context of Riddle 74 is well known and need not detain us long, though it has a bearing on my arguments. In modern editions the riddle consists of five printed lines of verse. In its unique manuscript source it appears as the last three lines of writing on fol. 126^v of the Exeter Book.⁵ It is one of ninety-five riddles, according to the standard numeration,⁶ that are written out in two main

³ Peter Clemoes, *Interactions of Thought and Language in Old English Poetry* (Cambridge, 1995), p. 185.

⁴ Patrizia Lendinara, 'Aspetti della società germanica negli enigma del Codice Exoniense', in *Antichità germaniche; I Parte; I Seminario avanzato in Filologia germanica*, ed. by Vitoria Dolcetti Corazza and Renato Gendre (Alessandria, 2001), pp. 2–41, takes a comprehensive view of the riddle genre as presenting a kind of microcosm of Anglo-Saxon society. Her solutions for individual riddles naturally differ in some instances from my own.

⁵ See the Exeter Book facsimile at that page.

⁶ There are ninety-one riddles according to Williamson's count. The reason that this count varies from the K-D count is disagreement as to whether K-D Riddles 1–3, 75–76, and 79–80

sets. The first set, riddles 1–59 (fols 101^r–115^r), is preceded by a large and miscellaneous group of poems, the last of which are *Deor* (fol. 100^{r-v}) and *Wulf and Eadwacer* (fols 100^v–101^r). The second set, riddles 61–95, occupies fols 124^v–130^v and concludes the Exeter Book. Between the two sets, a dozen other poems are written out in the same hand: *The Wife's Lament* (fol. 115), seven devotional poems (fols 115^v–122^v), another version of Riddle 30 (fol. 122^v), Riddle 60 (fols 122^v–123^r), *The Husband's Message* (fol. 123^{r-v}), and *The Ruin* (fols 123^v–124^v). No titles are given for any of these texts and there are no sectional divisions in the manuscript, so that the poems succeed one another without special distinctions other than capitalization of their first word on a new line and the marking of their last word with full-stop punctuation. There has naturally been some debate as to which of these poems belong to the riddle genre and which do not.⁷ While the versified version of the Lord's Prayer (fol. 122^r) is clearly not a riddle, some readers have thought that *The Husband's Message*, for example, is. Speaking of the group of six items that extends from Riddles 30b and 60 through the three capitalized sections of *The Husband's Message* to *The Ruin*, Anne Klinck suggests that 'the compiler seems to have thought that all six were riddle-like'.⁸ Certainly there is reason to conclude that the compiler of the manuscript (or its archetype) was a creative anthologist, gathering materials from various sources and making an effort to put like things together,⁹ but what these principles of likeness were is not altogether clear, nor were they necessarily followed consistently.

Riddle 74 is a good test case for larger arguments because it is short and complete, there are no disputes about its genre, and it presents almost no textual difficulties.¹⁰ In line 5 the manuscript reading *forð* 'forth', a nonsensical reading,

constitute seven separate poems or are the constituent parts of three single poems. Williamson favours the latter conclusion and numbers these as Riddles 1, 73, and 76, respectively, with the rest of his numeration adjusted accordingly. The list of riddle solutions included on pp. 141–48 below includes a comparison of the numbering systems used by Krapp and Dobbie, Williamson, and Muir. In this chapter as elsewhere in this book, the K-D numeration is adopted. Quotations of riddle texts in this chapter are from K-D unless specified otherwise.

⁷ A more extended discussion of genre is at pp. 46–48 below.

⁸ Klinck, p. 197.

⁹ Muir, I, 21–25.

¹⁰ Since the manuscript text is unpunctuated apart from capitalization of its initial word *lc* (line 1) and the inclusion of a full stop after *cwicu* in the last line, there are various possible ways of punctuating the text. These options have caused no more than minor debate, however, and I will pass over the question of punctuation now before returning to it after offering my solution.

is emended by almost universal agreement to *ferð* ‘spirit, soul’, yielding a verse that is grammatical, that makes sense in this context, and that is paralleled twice elsewhere in the riddles.¹¹ The text thus emended reads as follows, as punctuated by its most recent editor.

Ic wæs fæmne geong, feaxhar cwene,
 ond ænlic rinc on ane tid;
 fleah mid fuglum ond on flode swom,
 deaf under yþe dead mid fiscum,
 ond on foldan stop — hæfde ferð cwicu.¹²

In essence, the art of riddling is the art of deceptive speech. Here, as in over half of the riddles of the Exeter Book, the thing or object whose name is to be guessed speaks in its own voice.¹³ The speaker-subject tries to disguise its identity¹⁴ not through the usual human stratagems of silence or lies, but rather through the artful use of metaphor and other forms of deliberate ambiguity. The speaker must be identified in defiance of four paradoxes. It was female but also male; it was a young maiden but also a mature woman; it moved about not just in one medium but on land, in and on the sea, and in the air; and at one time or another it was both quick and dead.

Before I review proposed answers to this riddle, a glance at its published translations may be in order, for translations can easily predispose a reader in the direction of one or another solution. As has often been remarked, any act of translation (even the hyperliteral translation I have given in note 12) is at the same time an act of interpretation. Every translator of a work puts a different

¹¹ Cf. Riddle 10, verse 6a: *Hæfde feorh cwico* ‘I had a living spirit’; Riddle 13, verse 3a: *hæfdon feorg cwico* ‘they had living spirits’. To judge from these parallels, *ferð* (from *ferhþ* ‘mind, soul, spirit, heart’) functions as a variant of *feorh* ‘life, soul’.

¹² Muir, I, 366; text identical with Williamson, p. 109. What follows is a hyperliteral word-for-word translation: ‘I was (a) woman/girl young, (a) hair-gray woman/queen, and (a) peerless warrior/man in/at one time/season/hour; (I) flew among birds and in/on (the) sea swam, dived under (the) wave dead among fish/fishes, and stepped/walked on land — (I) had/held (a) spirit/soul (or souls) living.’

¹³ Tupper, p. lxxxix, lists fifty riddles in this category.

¹⁴ I shall try to avoid referring to the speaker by any third-person-singular pronoun, as by its gender the wording ‘he’, ‘she’, or ‘it’ can prejudice a solution. Where the resulting awkwardness becomes intolerable I shall use ‘it’, with the justification that the neuter pronoun is the least likely one to mislead modern English-speaking readers, given that most of the Exeter Book riddles have an inanimate solution.

spin on the text, and these different spins, even if slight, can be instructive.¹⁵ Moreover, verse is difficult to translate compared with prose, and Old English alliterative verse is notoriously difficult to render transparently. With no intent either to blame or praise this work as poetry in its own right, I will reproduce three translations of Riddle 74 that are likely to be well known. One is by Michael Alexander, the second by Kevin Crossley-Holland, and the third by Craig Williamson.¹⁶

Alexander translates the riddle as follows:

I was in one hour an ashen crone
a fair-faced man, a fresh girl,
floated on foam, flew with birds,
under the wave dived, dead among fish,
and walked upon land a living soul.

Here, noticeably, the first three main substantives come in a different order from what we see in the Exeter Book. Alexander has the speaker change from *crone* to *man* to *girl*, whereas in the original text the speaker changes from maiden to mature woman to man. The negative connotation of Alexander's 'crone' is absent from the OE noun *cwene*, or at least is very muted there.¹⁷ Alexander's 'crone' has an ashen complexion rather than ash-grey hair,¹⁸ while his man is 'fair-faced',

¹⁵ I discuss this aspect of translation theory with examples drawn from *Beowulf* in 'Rewriting *Beowulf*: The Task of Translation', *College English*, 55 (1993), 858–78.

¹⁶ The following examples are taken, respectively, from *The Earliest English Poems*, trans. by Michael J. Alexander (Harmondsworth, 1966), p. 101, repr. with no change in his *Old English Riddles from the Exeter Book* (London, 1980), p. 73; *The Exeter Riddle Book*, trans. by Kevin Crossley-Holland (London, 1978), p. 91, repr. with no change in his *The Exeter Book Riddles* (Harmondsworth, 1979), p. 90; and *A Feast of Creatures: Anglo-Saxon Riddle-Songs*, trans. by Craig Williamson (Philadelphia, 1982), p. 134. Other translations of Riddle 74 that I have consulted are by Thorpe, *Codex Exoniensis*, p. 487; *Anglo-Saxon Riddles of the Exeter Book*, trans. by Paull F. Baum (Durham, NC, 1963), pp. 51–52; *The Riddles of the Exeter Book*, trans. by H. H. Abbott (Cambridge, 1968), p. 41; Whitman, *Old English Riddles*, p. 213; and Pinsker and Ziegler, *Die altenglischen Rätsel*, p. 117.

¹⁷ The *DOE*, s.v. *cwene*. This word normally means 'woman' (sense 1) or 'wife' (sense 2). Its special senses are 'queen, empress', 'princess', or 'concubine' (in reference to a priest's consort, or perhaps wife). The word is used of the Virgin Mary as well as of historical queens of good repute.

¹⁸ Old English *feax* denotes 'hair', as in ch. 33 of the Laws of Æthelberht, where *feax-fang* 'pulling someone's hair' is a legal offense subject to compensation of fifty *sceattas*. The amount of this fine is the same as for rape of a slave of the second class (ch. 16). *The Laws of the Earliest*

a rather free rendering of *ānlic*, an OE adjective that occasionally bears its etymological sense ‘single’ or ‘singular’ but that in common usage denotes ‘incomparable, excellent, beautiful’.¹⁹ The four verbs of motion, too, come in a different sequence. Alexander’s speaker first *floated*, then *flew*, then *dived*, then *walked*, whereas the speaker of the original riddle first flew, then swam, then dived, and then stepped on land. From the practical standpoint of riddle solving, these small departures from the Exeter Book text could be misleading, for through them a code is scrambled that might be suggestive of a solution. In Alexander’s poem, also, the speaker ‘walked upon land a living soul’, whereas it is not clear that the original speaker had a living soul at the same time as it stepped on land. It might have had life at some prior stage of its existence; the OE past tense *hæfde* encompasses pluperfect usages.

Crossley-Holland’s version reads as follows:

I was once a young woman,
a glorious warrior, a grey-haired queen.
I soared with birds, stepped on the earth,
swam in the sea — dived under waves,
dead amongst fishes. I had a living spirit.

Although this translation is more literal than the preceding one, again the order of the first three main substantives is altered. Crossley-Holland’s speaker changes from a *young woman* to a *warrior* to a *queen* (far from a crone!) instead of from a young woman to a *cwene* to a warrior. The word *cwene* does not normally mean ‘queen’; the translator may have confused it with similar-looking *cwēn*, which normally does. The adjective ‘glorious’ is another loose rendering of *ānlic*, a word that need not imply fame. The speaker’s movement progresses from *air* to *earth* to *sea*, not from air to sea to land. Again, these departures from the Exeter Book text could interfere with a solution.

Craig Williamson faithfully reproduces the speaker’s movement from air to sea to land. Like Alexander, however, he avoids rendering *hæfde ferð cwicu* with a syntactically equivalent phrase and so his speaker is unambiguously alive at the same time as it moved about. In a more dramatic departure from the original wording, he reduces the number of substantives in the first series from three to two:

I was a gray girl, ash-haired, elegant,
And a singular warrior at the same time.

English Kings, ed. and trans. by F. L. Attenborough (Cambridge, 1922), pp. 8 and 6, respectively.

¹⁹ B-T, s.v. *ānlic* (in both the main volume and Toller’s *Supplement*); the DOE, s.v. *ānlic*.

I flew with the birds and swam in the sea,
 Dove under waves, dead among fish,
 And stood on the shore — locking in a living spirit.

Instead of a three-stage transformation from maiden to matron to man, Williamson offers the metamorphosis of a girl into a warrior. From the standpoint of riddle solving, this is an unfortunate loss. The noun *fæmne*, despite its etymological descent from Latin *femina*, normally denotes ‘maiden’ or ‘virgin’ rather than ‘woman’,²⁰ and that meaning is made all the more likely when the word is qualified by the adjective *geong*. The noun *cwene*, however, denotes a mature woman. Despite the enduring appeal of the ‘warrior-maiden’ motif in both fiction and life,²¹ something potentially important having to do with age and maturity is absent from this translation.

Two other points relating to the translation of Riddle 74 deserve notice. First, the second line of the Old English poem ends with the phrase *on āne tid*. Taken literally this phrase would seem to mean ‘at the same time’, as it does for example in an anonymous twelfth-century homily in Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Bodley 343,²² and that is how Williamson translates it. Alexander translates the phrase ‘in one hour’, a variation on the same sense. Crossley-Holland prefers to translate it as ‘once’, as in ‘once upon a time’. As I shall argue in due time, this latter choice happens to be an attractive one. Although I will not try to resolve the meaning of *on āne tid* here, I wish to make note of the translators’ different ways of handling it; for that difference, I believe, results from the calculated ambiguity of the Exeter Book text, which leads us down a false track at every turn. Second, the noun *ferð* in line 5 (the product of reasonable emendation), though regularly taken as grammatically singular since the verb that governs it is singular, could

²⁰ B-T, s.v. *fæmne*; the DOE, s.v. *fæmne*, sense 1.

²¹ For a discussion of this theme in British popular literature, see Dianne M. Dugaw, *Warrior Women and Popular Balladry, 1650–1850* (Cambridge, 1989). Although the theme is a perennial favourite that surfaces in works as different from one another as the Old Norse *Hervarar Saga* and Maxine Hong Kingston’s novel *The Woman Warrior* (New York, 1976), its relevance to this riddle cannot be assumed.

²² ‘Uton nu bihælden þa wunderlice swiftnesse þare sawlæ. Heo hafæð swa mycele swiftnesse, þæt heo on ane tid, gif heo wyle, bisceawiað heofenum ond ofer sæ flyhð, lond ond burga geondfaræð’ (Let us now consider the marvellous swiftness of the soul. It has such great speed that at a single time, if it wishes, it contemplates the heavens and flies over the sea and journeys through lands and cities). *Twelfth-Century Homilies in MS. Bodley 343*, ed. by A. O. Belfour, EETS OS, 137 (London, 1909), p. 88 (text slightly normalized). This example is relevant to the solution to Riddle 74 that is proposed by Erhart-Siebolt (see pp. 20–21 below).

also be grammatically plural. As a neuter a-stem monosyllabic noun with a long syllable, it takes no plural inflection. The *-u* inflection of the accompanying adjective *cwicu* does not help us here, for though one might expect it to indicate plurality, the same inflectional vowel (in the variant spelling *-o*) appears elsewhere with *cwic* in the riddles in a phrase that can only be taken in the singular.²³ 'I had a living spirit' is thus the usual translation of the last verse, though 'I had living spirits' or 'I held living spirits' or even 'he, she, or it held living spirits' remain possible alternatives.

If Riddle 74 remains unsolved, this is not because of a failure of will on the part of the critics. Over the century and a half since the Exeter Book was first published, at least nine different solutions have been proposed.²⁴ It will be useful to review these briefly.

The first solution, 'cuttlefish', was offered by Franz Dietrich in 1859.²⁵ Dietrich retracted his suggestion six years later for lack of evidence,²⁶ but John Walz then took up the cause.²⁷ Aldhelm's *Enigma* 16, 'Luligo', whose title is translated by Pitman as 'flying-fish' but that literally denotes 'cuttlefish' (Latin *lolligo*), bears some resemblance to Riddle 74.²⁸ According to Pliny the cuttlefish could fly out of water.²⁹ But since no authority claims that the cuttlefish is hermaphroditic, since Aldhelm's riddle says nothing about either a sex change

²³ For the plural, see verse 3a of Riddle 13; for the singular, verse 6a of Riddle 10, as cited above, p. 14, note 11.

²⁴ Donald K. Fry, 'Exeter Book Riddle Solutions', *Old English Newsletter*, 15.1 (1981), 22–33, offers a list of Exeter Book riddle solutions that were proposed through the 1970s (at p. 25 for Riddle 74). Muir, II, 655–63, 693, and 735–39, provides a more complete list of sources and solutions (at p. 737 for Riddle 74).

²⁵ Franz Eduard Dietrich, 'Die Räthsel des Exeterbuchs: Würdigung, Lösung und Herstellung', *ZfdA*, 11 (1859), 448–90 (at p. 482).

²⁶ Dietrich, 'Die Räthsel des Exeterbuchs: Verfasser; weitere Lösungen', *ZfdA*, 12 (1865), 232–52 (at p. 248).

²⁷ John A. Walz, 'Notes on the Anglo-Saxon Riddles', *Harvard Studies and Notes in Philology and Literature*, 5 (1896), 261–68 (at pp. 266–67).

²⁸ *The Riddles of Aldhelm*, ed. and trans. by J. H. Pitman (New Haven, CT, 1925), pp. 10–11. Aldhelm's riddle describes a creature with scales that swims with fish and flies with birds, but that cannot breathe air. There was evidently some confusion in the Anglo-Latin tradition: the cuttlefish, a cephalopod mollusk related to the octopus, does not have scales.

²⁹ Pliny, *Historia naturalis*, vol. III (bks 8–11), ed. and trans. by H. Rackham (London, 1940), bk 9, ch. 45 (pp. 218–19).

or life-in-death, and since the change from *fæmne* to *cwene* remains unexplained, a connection here is unlikely.

Moritz Trautmann's 'water in its various forms' (1894, 1905, 1915) is ingeniously argued.³⁰ The *fæmne geong* is a fresh spring (OE *burne*, a feminine noun); the *feaxhār cwene* is an ice floe;³¹ and the *rinc* is snow (OE *snāw*, a masculine noun). Snow flies through the air; ice floats in the sea, and ice also melts into the sea when it 'dies', or dissipates; and water flows on land in the forms of streams or, as waves, rolls over the shore. The objection has been made that water is not alive, that it has no *ferð cwicu*. In his 1915 note, Trautmann evades this difficulty by suggesting that that phrase, taken in the plural, refers to fish and other aquatic creatures, who are 'held' by the water of seas, pools, and rivers. If no better solution were available, I would be tempted to opt for Trautmann's, with some uncertainty as to why the iceberg is a feminine personification as well as with some doubt as to whether ice, when it melts away into its matrix and alter ego of water, can legitimately be called 'dead'.³²

Frederick Tupper argued vigorously for the solution 'siren' (1903, 1906, 1910).³³ His proposal has attracted intermittent support despite the very peripheral place of the siren in Anglo-Saxon lore; but can we seriously imagine the speaker to be a transsexual birdlike siren that has dived among fish and has died by being turned to stone? Here is one instance where Tupper's classical learning has led him into the realm of fancy.

³⁰ Trautmann offered this solution without supporting argument in 'Die Auflösungen der altenglischen Rätsel', *Beiblatt zur Anglia*, 5 (1894), 46–51. He argued his case fully in 'Alte und neue Antworten auf altenglischen Rätsel', *Bonner Beiträge zur Anglistik*, 19 (1905), 167–215 (at pp. 201–03), then confirmed and nuanced that argument in his 1915 edition *Die altenglischen Rätsel*, p. 128.

³¹ The *feaxhār cwene* could also be frost. Frost might seem long-haired and is clearly greyish; cf. 'hoar-frost', though the earliest use of this word is *c.* 1290, according to the *OED*. This connection is supported by Riddle 93, lines 13–14, where the adjective *hār* and the noun *feax* appear in conjunction with frost: *hwilum hara scoc / forst of feaxe* 'sometimes grey frost shook from [my] hair' (according to one possible translation of this grammatically difficult clause).

³² Baum, in *Anglo-Saxon Riddles*, suggests that if 'water' is the solution, then a more specific answer would be 'rain': he sees here a 'gentle shower, a heavy downpour, in the sea its natural form (its life) is lost; a little imagination can see it as hail walking on the ground' (p. 51). But this proposal makes little sense of either the phrase *feaxhār cwene* or *ferð cwicu*.

³³ Tupper, pp. 214–15; cf. his studies 'Originals and Analogues of the Exeter Book Riddles', *MLN*, 18 (1903), 97–106 (at p. 100), and 'Solutions of the Exeter Book Riddles', *MLN*, 21 (1906), 97–105 (at pp. 103–04).

Ferdinand Holthausen's proposal 'swan' (1925), on the other hand, is perhaps more literal than one might wish.³⁴ The cygnet, in his view, is the *fæmne geong*. The adult female, with a few grey feathers still attached, is the *cwene*, while (with some ingenuity here) the female is also the *rinc*, since OE *swān* 'swan' is a grammatically masculine noun. A swan does indeed fly, swim, dive, and step on land. But if a swan is meant, it would appear to be a dead swan unless we accept Holthausen's suggested emendation of *dēad* 'dead' to *drēag* 'moved'. Given the neat antithesis of the quick and the dead in lines 4–5, no other editor or translator has adopted this course. In a recent article, Mercedes Salvador Bello accepts the answer 'swan' as well as the manuscript reading *dēad* and offers the creative proposal that the 'death' in question refers metaphorically to the embryonic phase of the bird when it is in the egg, whereas the reference to the bird's 'living spirit' applies to the creature after the egg is hatched.³⁵ This solution is tempting as long as one does not insist that the contents of the egg are, after all, living. Recently Peter Kitson has proposed an ingenious variation on the 'swan' solution that sidesteps the problem of the speaker's 'death' by postulating that allusion is being made to the former belief that rather than migrating, certain waterbirds lie hidden for long periods of the year like fishes beneath the surface of the sea. He therefore takes the bird in question to be the *ylfetu* 'whooper swan', a winter migrant to the British Isles from circumpolar regions.³⁶ Since OE *ylfetu* is a feminine noun, the female personification of the speaker in line 1 is explained. Kitson does not explain why the same creature is described as a masculine *rinc* in line 2.

Erhardt-Siebold's solution of 'soul' (1946, 1952) is based on a parallel between Riddle 74 and a fragment from the writings of the pre-Socratic philosopher Empedocles.³⁷ The sinful soul, according to Empedocles, is doomed to a cyclic metempsychosis that starts from earthly forms (a young man, a maiden, and a plant), moves thence to air (in the form of a bird), thence to water (in the form of a fish), and finally back to land (equated, here, with a fish out of the sea). This proposed solution lacks both contextual support and textual plausibility. There is no other evidence for knowledge of the Empedocles fragment in Anglo-Saxon

³⁴ Ferdinand Holthausen, 'Anglosaxonica Minora', *Beiblatt zur Anglia*, 36 (1925), 219–20 (at p. 220).

³⁵ Mercedes Salvador Bello, 'Direct and Indirect Clues: Exeter Riddle no. 74 Reconsidered', *NM*, 99 (1998), 17–29.

³⁶ Peter Kitson, 'Swans and Geese in Old English Riddles', *ASSAH*, 7 (1994), 79–84.

³⁷ Erika von Erhardt-Siebold, 'The Anglo-Saxon Riddle 74 and Empedocles' Fragment 117', *MÆ*, 15 (1946), 48–54, and 'Note on Anglo-Saxon Riddle 74', *MÆ*, 21 (1952), 36–37.

England, while neither the *feaxhār cwene* of the Old English riddle nor the phrase *dēad mid fiscum* is explained. One thing we do know about the soul, whether in its Empedoclean or its Christian form, is that it does not die.

F. H. Whitman offers the answer ‘writing’, or ‘quill pen used for writing’ (1968, 1982).³⁸ The solution works well for Riddle 51 (‘Pen and Fingers’), so why not here as well? Feathers (or the birds who once wore them) do fly through the air and swim in the sea, while in Riddle 51 a quill pen does dip into an inkwell (the ‘sea of ink’, as it were) and leaves ‘tracks’ on a manuscript page (the land on which the riddle-creature steps). Important details of Riddle 74 remain unexplained, however. Whitman can perhaps be permitted to collapse the *fæmne geong* and the *feaxhār cwene* of line 1 into a single thing, the quill pen, but what of the *ænlic rinc* of lines 1–2 and the fishes of line 4?³⁹

Another solution that has recently been proposed is Kiernan’s ‘sea-eagle’ (1974).⁴⁰ Like Holthausen’s swan or Kitson’s whooper swan, the sea-eagle is at home in the air, in or on the sea, and on the shore. Kiernan must face the same objection as Holthausen, however: what to do with *dēad mid fiscum*? Rejecting the route of textual emendation, Kiernan appeals to medieval exegesis. The medieval Latin *Physiologus* recounts a legend to the effect that the eagle — not, however, specifically the sea-eagle — ‘when he grows old, seeks a well, and by diving into it renews himself’.⁴¹ As for the apparent sex change of lines 1–2, Kiernan interprets that part of the riddle as a reference to parthenogenesis, which he relates to both the Virgin Mary and vultures, in a tradition going back to Ambrose. He then has the task of relating vultures to the eagle, and specifically to the sea-eagle, which however is not grey but white. Kiernan’s exegetical route, when superimposed on a literalist base, becomes so complex as to seem unwieldy

³⁸ F. H. Whitman, ‘OE Riddle 74’, *English Language Notes*, 6 (1968), 1–5; Whitman, *Old English Riddles*, pp. 144–48. I understand that the goose-feather solution is pursued by Helga Göbel in a study I have not seen, *Studien zu den altenglischen Schriftwesenrätseln der Exeter Book*, Epistemata: Würzburger wissenschaftliche Schriften, Reihe Literaturwissenschaft, 7 (Würzburg, 1980).

³⁹ Whitman makes bold but rather desperate attempts to relate the *rinc* to the nib of the pen and the *fiscas* to the cuttlefish, whose black fluid was sometimes used for ink in the ancient world though not, apparently, in Anglo-Saxon England.

⁴⁰ K. S. Kiernan, ‘The Mysteries of the Sea-Eagle in Exeter Riddle 74’, *PQ*, 54 (1974), 518–22.

⁴¹ Kiernan, ‘Mysteries of the Sea-Eagle’, p. 520.

and leaves us with a dead (but now resurrected) parthenogenic bird freshly emerged from the baptismal font.

In the notes to his critical edition of 1977, Williamson has proposed the solution 'ship's figurehead in the form of a girl'.⁴² This solution, like Whitman's pen, depends on our taking the *fæmne geong* and the *feaxhār cwene* of line 1 as a single thing, here an ash-haired girl, with reference to both the hair of a carved figurehead and the grey colour of wood that has been subject to weathering. The figurehead is dead, but it is made of what was once living wood. The figurehead can be called a *rinc*, in Williamson's view, because it charges the waves like a beautiful warrior. There is a historical/contextual problem with this solution, however. Despite Williamson's suggestion to the contrary, neither archaeology nor art history provides evidence that shipwrights of this period fashioned figureheads in the shape of young women. Although zoomorphic or draconic figureheads are known from the Anglo-Saxon and Viking periods, nowhere do we find carvings in the shape of a girl.⁴³ The 'ship's figurehead' solution is therefore subject to doubt whether or not Williamson's reading of the metaphors is accepted.

Finally, another non-metaphorical solution was offered by Daniel Donoghue in 1998 — a 'bumper year' for studies of Riddle 74, for both Salvador Bello's 'swan' solution and my present study in its earlier form were also published then. Donoghue argues that the riddle amounts to a coded description of a creature well known in medieval legendry, the barnacle goose (or *bernaca*, to use the older Latin form of its name).⁴⁴ According to early ornithological lore, this creature began its life as a shellfish and matured into a waterfowl. Donoghue suggests that lines 3–5 of the riddle 'describe different stages in the life cycle of the barnacle goose', while the first two lines 'allude to the way the bird does not participate in the reproduction of its own species'.⁴⁵ The former claim is perhaps more persuasive than the latter. In order to find a barnacle goose in lines 1–2, Donoghue must interpret the *fæmne geong* as 'a virgin', the *feaxhār cwene* as 'a woman

⁴² Williamson, pp. 349–52.

⁴³ See Rupert Bruce-Mitford, 'Ships' Figure-Heads of the Migration Period', in his *Aspects of Anglo-Saxon Archaeology* (London, 1974), pp. 175–87.

⁴⁴ Daniel Donoghue, 'An *Anser* for Exeter Book Riddle 74', in *Words and Works: Studies in Medieval English Language and Literature in Honour of Fred C. Robinson*, ed. by Peter S. Baker and Nicholas Howe (Toronto, 1998), pp. 45–58. As Donoghue points out, 'barnacle goose' is the accepted solution to a different Exeter Book riddle, no. 10, and so the possibility that Riddle 74 has the same answer would seem to be worth exploring, given this riddle's reference to a creature that apparently can swim, fly, and go on land.

⁴⁵ Donoghue, 'An *Anser*', p. 47.

after child-bearing years', and the *ænlic rinc* as 'a bachelor, man without a sexual partner' (p. 55). The common theme he perceives here — sexual sterility — thus looms rather larger in his proposed solution than in the riddle text, when that text is read in a straightforward way. The OE adjective *ænlic* can indeed mean 'solitary', but far more often (as has been noted above) what it denotes is 'incomparable, excellent, beautiful'. I can find no instance, unless it is this one, where that word is used with reference to a single person lacking a partner.

It therefore seems that over the century and a half since Riddle 74 was first published, scholars have hunted through both physical nature and material culture without finding a viable solution.⁴⁶ They have scoured the myths and texts of the ancient classical world for clues and have come up with empty hands. They have thumbed through Pliny's natural history and the medieval *Physiologus*, they have applied the art of medieval exegesis, and they have stretched their personal powers of imagination to the utmost without evident success. No convincing parallel has been cited either from the medieval Latin tradition or from elsewhere in the Exeter Book. Critics remain as baffled as ever by the paradoxes of female in male, of young in old, of life in death, of a creature that seems to know no physical limits to its powers of motion.

The Literary Riddle and the Folk Riddle

How do we proceed, then, in this impasse? If we were dealing with social or 'folk' riddling, there would be no problem. Spoken riddles 'presuppose at least two parties, the poser and the solver, and constitute a dialogue between the two'.⁴⁷ In the human contexts that are studied by anthropologists and folklorists who have studied the performance of riddles in small groups, the 'correct' answer to a riddle is whatever the poser says is right. According to the rules of the game, the poser alone has the authority to declare a solution. What is black and white and red all over? The newspaper, you say? No, it is a blushing zebra. A blushing

⁴⁶ Other solutions to Riddle 74 have been proposed, but only the ones I have discussed call for serious consideration. During the boom years of solar mythology, Eduard Müller opted for 'sun': *Die Rätsel des Exeterbuches* (Cöthen, 1861), p. 19. Lois Bragg, *The Lyric Speakers of Old English Poetry* (Rutherford, NJ, 1991), posits a human speaker and takes that speaker's words literally, despite the difficulty one might have in imagining what earthly person could satisfy the claims made in these five lines.

⁴⁷ Nigel F. Barley, 'Structural Aspects of the Anglo-Saxon Riddle', *Semiotica*, 10 (1974), 143–75 (pp. 143–44).

zebra, you say? No, it is a sunburned zebra, or a skunk with diaper rash, or a chocolate sundae with ketchup on it, or a squashed nun, or a penguin that cut himself shaving.⁴⁸ There is no escaping either the poser's authority or his wit. The riddler is the *magister ludi* whose decision is final.

In the Anglo-Saxon context, however, we have no riddle performers, only riddle texts. The artful and uncompromising textuality of the Exeter Book riddles is in part what makes them so interesting from a literary perspective, for some of them pose as brisk a challenge to the intelligence and imagination of their readers as is offered by any other poetry of this time. Let us therefore consider what light can be cast on the art of the Exeter Book riddles by consideration of a literary riddle of more recent date.

A poem written by American poet Emily Dickinson (1830–86) will serve well for our purposes. It is headed '1463' in the author's unique holograph collection, a neatly handwritten set of fascicles that was discovered after her death and that has come to be regarded as one of the greatest achievements of American poetry. Like the poems of the Exeter Book, this poem stands alone in its manuscript context without title or explanatory notes. It reads as follows in Thomas Johnson's edition, which is a semi-diplomatic one:⁴⁹

A Route of Evanescence
 With a revolving Wheel –
 A Resonance of Emerald –
 A Rush of Cochineal –
 And every Blossom on the Bush
 Adjusts it's tumbled Head –
 The mail from Tunis, probably,
 An easy Morning's Ride –

Some creature or thing is being described in oblique, metaphorical terms. How can we tell what it is?

As many answers might be proposed for this riddle as have been proposed for Exeter Book Riddle 74 if it existed only in Dickinson's manuscript fascicles, but only one answer would be right. Dickinson herself named the solution no fewer

⁴⁸ Most of these solutions are drawn from Dan Ben-Amos, 'Solutions to Riddles', *JAF*, 89 (1976), 249–54. The special issue of that journal in which that article appears (no. 352, ed. by Elli Köngäs Miranda) is devoted to the riddle.

⁴⁹ *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. by Thomas H. Johnson, 3 vols (Cambridge, MA, 1963), III, 1010. Capitalization, punctuation, and the apostrophe in line 6 follow Dickinson's usage.

than five times in personal letters when she sent this poem to friends.⁵⁰ The object to be guessed is a hummingbird, the bird that James Audubon described as a 'glittering garment of the rainbow'.⁵¹ The revolving wheel of line 2 is the blur of the hummingbird's wings, which (scientists tell us) beat at the rate of eighty beats per second in ordinary forward flight and, reportedly, up to two hundred beats per second during courtship. The emerald and cochineal are features of the iridescent colouration of the particular North American hummingbird that Dickinson had in mind: probably the male ruby-throated hummingbird (*Archilochus columbris*), which has a range from Central America to Canada and which frequents summer gardens in that part of Massachusetts where the Dickinson family made their home. The phrase 'Route of Evanescence' neatly evokes the hummingbird's unique 'now-you-see-it, now-you-don't' manner of flying: the hummingbird can hover virtually motionless, then accelerate almost instantaneously to a top speed of fifty to sixty km/hour in forward flight. The blossoms on the bush are shaking slightly, somewhat dishevelled after their quasi-sexual encounter with the bird. Tunis represents any exotic location, and yet the hummingbird, like any otherworldly messenger, seems to flit effortlessly between the land of iridescent imaginings and anyone's back garden.

While poem '1463' is obviously a literary riddle, and while Dickinson wrote other poems in the same genre, neither this one example nor her riddle poems as a group demand analysis separate from her verse taken as a whole. Rhetorically, 'A Route of Evanescence' functions very nearly like any of her other 1775 lyric poems. It offers comparable challenges and pleasures. In one after another of her poems can be traced the same oblique approach to a subject, the same bold use of metaphor, and the same fondness for personification as is evident here, whether her subject is the death-watch, a train in motion over the hills, a mood of intense despair, or delight in one of the creatures of nature.

Furthermore, the process of reading 'A Route of Evanescence' — the process of unriddling this text — is the same process that is at work when we read any of Dickinson's poems. With any of them she plays similar games with the reader. We feel the same initial bafflement at the aggressive alterity of the text. We are challenged to draw on all the resources of our imagination to resolve the problem posed by this alterity so as to enter into the thought-world of the speaker. Then,

⁵⁰ *Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. by Johnson, III, 1011–12.

⁵¹ Quoted by Paul A. Johnsgard, *The Hummingbirds of North America* (Washington, DC, 1983), p. 11. I rely on this source for the technical information provided in this paragraph. Johnsgard includes as his plate 16C a colour illustration of the ruby-throated hummingbird.

if all goes well, comes the sudden pleasure of guessing the right answer — or, in other words, understanding the literal subject of the poem. Finally and most importantly, we can then savour our insight and work out its implications, attentive to the nuances of every phrase and sometimes astounded by Dickinson's genius for metaphor.

Just as Riddle 74 is to the whole Exeter Book anthology, then, so Dickinson's poem '1463' is to her body of poetry as a whole. Whether we are speaking of formalist poetics or of reader-response theory, the art of a riddle is a quintessence of the art of the more lyrical type of poetry. This is a point to which I will return.

One troublesome question needs posing here, however. Suppose we had no confirmation from Dickinson's private correspondence that 'hummingbird' is the subject of poem '1463'. By what standards could we still conclude that this is the right answer and that all other possible answers are wrong? To return to the Anglo-Saxon context: how can one judge if any one solution to Riddle 74 is so superior to others that it can be declared 'the' solution? What makes for validity in interpretation, anyway?

I mean this to be a practical question, not an abstract one. There are pragmatic principles of criticism that we employ all the time and that still beg for clarification. Let us then take a moment to consider their basis.

What Makes for Validity in Interpretation?

Forty years ago, E. D. Hirsch's classic study *Validity in Interpretation* staked out one position in a debate that subsequently has taken many forms.⁵² In brief, according to Hirsch, a work means what its author claims it means, or what readers can reasonably deduce to have been the author's intent based on signs that are evident in the text. The ascription of intentionality to the figure of the author-as-God is no clear-cut matter, however, as has often been pointed out. The author may be dead and may have left no statement as to his or her intentions. Even if still alive, the author may be lying, or drunk, or otherwise untrustworthy as a witness. Or it could be that by happenstance, the author has hit upon some combination of words whose import, though meaningful to some readers, was never consciously intended. In the Old English period, very few authors can be visualized in conjunction with the texts that have come down to us. Almost all the poetry is of anonymous origin, and the concept of authorship during this period

⁵² E. D. Hirsch, Jr, *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven, CT, 1967).

of formulaic composition, massive debts to prior sources, and frequent scribal rewriting has rightly become one of the most contested points of literary criticism.⁵³ The argument from intention should not be dismissed — someone, somewhere must have meant something by the texts that we read today! — but it is fraught with difficulties.

Running counter to all arguments based on intentionality is a vein of thought, prominent in critical studies postmarked in Paris in recent years, to the effect that no one can possibly make meaningful statements in a medium as slippery as language, and that if someone does try to make meaningful statements, then no one else can possibly construe them. Writing partly to shun the nihilistic abyss that has been opened up by deconstruction, partly to provoke old-school positivists, Stanley Fish has marked out a hermeneutical position that allows for the identification of meaning in a text, yet from a standpoint opposite to that of Hirsch.⁵⁴ Meaning is not to be ascertained by trying to enter into an author's consciousness, nor is it inscribed immutably in the text, as some New Critics used to imagine. Rather, it occurs within the individual reader as that person responds to the stimulus of the text. For obvious practical reasons, few critics are willing to embrace the pure relativism that this view entails in its 'hard' form. Fish suggests two possible ways of mitigating the drawbacks of pure relativism: authority and convention. The meaning that a competent or authoritative person ascribes to a text is preferable to a meaning that is declared by anyone else; or, alternatively, acceptable meanings are distinguished from unacceptable ones by judgement of an interpretive community of competent members. In other words (to caricature this argument somewhat cruelly), meaning is what Stanley Fish says it is, or it is what a group of Stanley Fish's friends says it is. 'Soft' relativism of this kind, too, can have only slight appeal to medievalists, few of whom are likely to grant any one scholar or circle of scholars the authority to declare solutions to literary problems. When we try to solve Riddle 74, we have no access to the interpretive community of the Anglo-Saxons themselves, and modern-day specialists in Old English (the best available substitute for that community) have arrived at no consensus of opinion. We still need to know how to proceed.

⁵³ Carol Braun Pasternack, *The Textuality of Old English Poetry* (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 12–21, reviews the problematics of authorship and audience in the Anglo-Saxon context without exhausting this potentially explosive subject.

⁵⁴ Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge, MA, 1980).

Paul Armstrong's thoughtful study *Conflicting Readings: Variety and Validity in Interpretation* reviews such debates from a philosophical perspective and makes a case for a middle ground that allows for limited pluralism within a phenomenological framework.⁵⁵ Mistrusting the double absolutisms of authorial intention and radical relativism,⁵⁶ Armstrong offers three tests for validity in interpretation: *inclusiveness*, *intersubjectivity*, and *efficacy*. In brief, what he means by these terms is that first of all, an interpretation, to be valid, should be complete and should involve 'consistency-building' among various elements. Second, it should prove acceptable to the members of an interpretive community. Third, it should lead to new insights and continued comprehension of the topic.

Although there is nothing unreasonable about Armstrong's approach, we might note that it more accurately helps us locate what has been regarded as a valid interpretation in the past than it tells us how to discover merit in a proposed new reading. Armstrong's criterion of 'efficacy', for example, looks forward towards the possible consequences of a hermeneutical discovery; but before we can be aware of such consequences, we sometimes need to have achieved historical distance from the problem in question. As for Armstrong's appeal to 'intersubjectivity', this is essentially a nuanced version of Fish's argument for the authority of the interpretive community, and it is subject to similar objections. In any historical era or among any group of interpreters, consensus may harden into dogma regarding the truth value of particular claims: Marxist claims among Marxist critics, for example, or exegetical claims among medieval theologians, or Freudian claims among mid-twentieth-century psychoanalysts who are not in the Jungian camp. Interpretations that are accepted by consensus of one group, and that are even thought to yield brilliant insights, may be unacceptable to another equally vocal, well-credentialed group. Moreover, consensus positions die hard, for they are rarely shaken by solutions that proceed from initial assumptions that fall outside the parameters accepted by the group. Michel Foucault responded as follows to the charge that by failing to affiliate himself with any consensus group, he forfeited the right to represent anyone or any values:

[One critic has pointed out] that in these analyses I do not appeal to any 'we' — to any of those 'we's' whose consensus, whose values, whose traditions constitute the framework for a thought and define the conditions in which it can be validated. But the problem is, precisely, to decide if it is actually suitable to place oneself within a 'we' in

⁵⁵ Paul B. Armstrong, *Conflicting Readings: Variety and Validity in Interpretation* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1990).

⁵⁶ Paradoxically, 'hard' relativism is an absolutist position, for it categorically denies a locus for validity in interpretation outside the mind of the individual interpreter.

order to assert the principles one recognizes and the values one accepts; or if it is not, rather, necessary to make the future formation of a 'we' possible [. . .].⁵⁷

If we accept Foucault's defence, then what is sometimes needed is an interpretive judgement that is both new and so powerful that it can create a new consensus; but this process of acceptance may take time, and it does not necessarily happen at all.

Whether the arguments that I have summarized in the preceding paragraphs are found appealing or appalling, some of us may remain impatient about the need for reasonable ways to test proposed solutions for a poem like Riddle 74. The one book written by an Anglo-Saxonist that directly addresses the question of validity in interpretation, Stanley B. Greenfield's *The Interpretation of Old English Poems*, now seems somewhat dated, however well reasoned it is.⁵⁸ Greenfield offers no system for testing validity. Instead, working against the grain of the 'historical' (that is, exegetical) mode of criticism that was especially popular during the 1950s and 1960s, he argues in favour of interpretations that engage closely with the language of the text, working out from there to the historical context. Greenfield seems to hope that in specific instances, his readers will accept as valid his nuanced ad hoc resolutions of one critical problem or another.

Finding available no master key to the door labelled 'interpretation', I therefore have drawn up a working list of criteria that ought to be satisfied if a riddle solution is to be found valid.⁵⁹ The principles are four in number. Each can be expressed in both a positive and a negative form.

First, a valid solution must be *philologically exact*, to the extent that any of us is capable of judging and practising good philology, which itself is a contestable enterprise that has to be positioned within a hermeneutical system. To speak in negative terms, the solution contains no howlers, or at least not any howlers that are crucial to the point being made. Nothing in the interpretation does violence to the specific language of the text, according to all reasonable standards of lexicography and textual criticism. No word or phrase is forced to mean anything

⁵⁷ *The Foucault Reader*, ed. by Paul Rabinow (Harmondsworth, 1986), p. 385.

⁵⁸ Stanley B. Greenfield, *The Interpretation of Old English Poems* (London, 1972), esp. ch. 1: 'Towards a Critical Framework' (pp. 1–29).

⁵⁹ Barley, 'Structural Aspects of the Anglo-Saxon Riddle', raises the issue of validity, but only in the course of a short paragraph (p. 152). More helpfully, he then works through the process by which specific riddles can be disambiguated. Heeding Ben-Amos, 'Solutions to Riddles', we should not forget that in a social context, riddling is a deliberate and sometimes even tyrannical manipulation of truth. The number of possible solutions to a riddle can be legion, even though the person posing the riddle at a given time only accepts one solution as valid.

other than what it can reasonably be expected to mean, given the linguistic conventions of the era in question — conventions that do, of course, encompass implicit rules for acceptable metaphors, kennings, puns, irony, and other sorts of double meanings.

Second, a valid solution is *comprehensive*. As with Armstrong's criterion of inclusiveness, no potentially important aspect or detail of the text is left out; nothing is left unexplained. The solution is not just declared; it is developed step by step on the basis of a reasonable and sufficient body of evidence. As we have seen, for example, the cuttlefish and quill-pen solutions to Riddle 74 founder on the unexplained male/female paradox, and so neither of these readings is attractive. Moreover, the solution does not contradict itself. It functions smoothly within whatever system of belief or analysis is activated by this solution. To take an example from riddle solving: the Empedoclean soul, through metempsychosis, can change its shape and age and sex, but it cannot be both living and dead. Erhardt-Sieboldt's solution to Riddle 74 must therefore be rejected.

Third, the solution makes for a good *historical/contextual fit*. It is not anachronistic. It does not stand in intolerable opposition to whatever else is known about the historical period during which the work in question was composed and the author who composed it (if that disputed category 'authorship' is invoked). It also is in harmony with the genre (or the nexus of genres) that is at stake, the intellectual tradition to which the work appears to pertain, and the sources and analogues of the work (if sources and analogues to it are known, or can be located). The solution is therefore in alignment with the possible expectations of an original audience. This is not to say that any of these factors will determine the meaning of the work in question. Any author whose work is worth reading is capable of pushing generic expectations to their limit, so that interpretation must be prepared to go beyond genre at times. Certain interpretations of certain works, still, can be ruled out as historically impossible, while others may appear so implausible as to impede belief. To return to Emily Dickinson's hummingbird riddle, for example, if one were to propose the solution 'a rainbow-coloured helicopter just arrived from North Africa', every detail of the poem would be accounted for consistently, but the answer is still a cultural absurdity.

Finally, the proposed solution not only satisfies all the first three criteria I have named. It also has an aesthetic appeal to it (deriving from its relative simplicity) that can be summed up under the name *elegance*. The solution has an 'inner click', to use an expression favoured by Leo Spitzer.⁶⁰ It is not clumsy. It is no

⁶⁰ Leo Spitzer, *Linguistics and Literary History* (Princeton, NJ, 1948), p. 7.

more involved or ingenious than it needs to be. There are no transsexual dead birds lurking about. A correct riddle solution engenders a minor rapture that is akin to what a mathematician experiences when, after years of labour, he or she discovers an elegant solution to a complex problem. Trautmann's 'water in its various forms' is a solution to Riddle 74 that has some elegance about it, for example, whether or not one accepts it, for through one leap of the imagination it transforms what had seemed an exotic creature into something utterly familiar.

If these four intertwining principles of validity do indeed constitute a practical basis for determining correctness in riddling — always in the absence of a flesh-and-blood riddler who will set us straight, of course — then what must also be granted, I believe, is that what we are developing is a system of practical criticism that can come to grips with the problem of validity in interpretation in general. What holds true for the special genre that we call the literary riddle should also hold true for poetry in general, or indeed for any kind of interpretive activity that is done by remote control rather than in face-to-face personal encounters. If what we want is a pragmatic basis for arriving at relative probabilities among many competing possibilities of meaning, then this four-point programme provides a reasonable point of departure.

Unriddling Riddle 74

Some while ago, I promised that I would offer a solution — *the* uniquely acceptable solution, as I like to think — to Exeter Book Riddle 74. I will now do so. We can then see whether this new solution satisfies reasonable criteria for validity any better than the other solutions that have been proposed have done.

The best heuristic strategy in this instance is to start at the end of the riddle and work step by step backwards. *Hæfde ferð cwicu*, the speaker concludes: 'I had a living spirit', if we give these words their face value. This last verse may give us a crucial hint. The speaker of this poem seems to have changed from a 'quick' state to a 'dead' one. Let us then take as our initial act-of-faith assumption that the speaker is an artefact that has been made from some formerly living thing. It is then an object akin to the war-horn and drinking-horn of Riddle 14, which used to be the horn of an ox; or the leather of Riddles 12, 38, and 72, which used to be the hide of a living ox; or the inkhorns of Riddles 88 and 93, which used to be antlers on the head of a stag; or the cross of Riddle 53, which used to be a tree; or, for that matter, it must be like the cross in the poem known as *The Dream of the Rood*, which tells its own life story from the time that it grew up as a tree in the forest. Other examples could be cited. The Exeter Book includes a

goodly number of ‘transformation’ riddles that attempt to mystify the reader by juxtaposing two stages of life in a manner that highlights the continuity of material substance through profound changes of form and function.⁶¹ What kind of an artefact speaks here, then? The middle of the poem tells us. It is something mobile. It is something that — speaking metaphorically, we may assume — ‘flies’, ‘swims’, ‘dives’, and yet also ‘steps on land’. A tentative answer to the riddle can now be proposed: it is a *ship*. But let us be sure to visualize this ship correctly, for it is not a modern ship, of course, but rather a ship of the kind that would have been familiar to English-speaking people during roughly the eighth to tenth centuries AD, the apparent period when the poems of the Exeter Book were being written and compiled. Let us pursue this hypothesis.

Ships, especially those with sails, metaphorically fly like birds. This is what Beowulf’s ship does, for example, when it is speeding on its way from the hero’s homeland to the coast of Denmark:

Gewat þa ofer wægholm winde gefysed
flota famiheals fugle gelicost. (lines 217–18)⁶²

(Then the foamy-necked floater [the ship] departed over the ocean, impelled by the wind, most like a bird.)

Ships obviously swim on the sea, metaphorically speaking. When travelling in high seas, they also metaphorically dive beneath the waves, as any sailor knows who has seen waves cascading over the prow. And what do ships do at the end of their journeys — Viking-style ships, that is? They are not normally anchored offshore. They are beached, and thus metaphorically they step onto the land, as Beowulf’s same ship does on its return voyage from Denmark to the land of the Geatas:

Ceol up geþrang
lyftgeswenced, on lande stod. (lines 1912b–13)⁶³

(The ship sped ashore, driven by the wind; it came to rest on land.)

⁶¹ Paul Sorrell, ‘Oaks, Ships, Riddles and the Old English *Rune Poem*’, *ASE* 19 (1990), 103–16 (at p. 109, n. 26), lists as other examples of ‘transformation’ riddles nos 26, 28, 73, 83, 88, and 93, with reference also to nos 9, 12, 14, 27, 74, and 77. This is only a partial list; others that could be added to it are nos 30, 53, 60, 69, 92, and 93.

⁶² *Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*, ed. by Fr. Klaeber, 3rd edn with 1st and 2nd supplements (Lexington, MA, 1950), p. 9.

⁶³ *Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*, ed. by Klaeber, p. 71.

So the speaker-subject of Riddle 74 could be a ship or boat. We may now be halfway to a solution, but only halfway, for lines 1–2 must still be interpreted. Their use of metaphor is not impenetrable, however. What is a ship or boat made of? Wood. While the *ænlic rinc* of line 2 could be the ship itself — ocean-faring ships of the Viking Age were indeed singularly beautiful objects — the feminine item or items evoked in line 1 must be something different. I suggest that what is designated is the wood of the ship when it was a living tree.⁶⁴

If we pursue this possibility, then the *femne geong* of line 1 is the tree in the form of a sapling, while the *feaxhār cwene* must be the mature tree from which timber is cut. Although the compound adjective *feax-hār* is unique to this poem and is therefore a small riddle in itself, its two components are commonplace, and the simplex *hār*, ‘grey’ or ‘old and grey’, occurs many times with reference to trees. One famous example is the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* entry for the year 1066. Here a *hār* apple tree is said to mark the site near Hastings where King Harold Godwinsson fought to the death against Duke William of Normandy:

Dis wearð þa Harolde cyng gedydd, ond he gaderade þa micelne here, ond com him togenes æt þære haran apuldran.⁶⁵

(This news was then brought to King Harold, and he then mustered a great army and came against him [Duke William] at the old grey apple-tree.)

A scanning of the charters of the Anglo-Saxon period will turn up no fewer than thirty-seven references to *hār* trees that served as boundary markers in a local landscape. Nine of these instances refer to thorn trees (OE *þorn*, denoting one or another type of hawthorn), seven of them to willows (OE *wiðig*), no fewer than twenty to apple trees (OE *apuldor* or *apuldre*, with many variant spellings), and there is one solitary hazel (OE *hæsel*).⁶⁶ *Hār* is an adjective that is especially appropriate to old, well-established trees because of their tendency to host a robust collection of lichens, which often take the form of crusty patches or bushy

⁶⁴ This suggestion is in accord with the system of Old English poetic diction, for many ship-kennings in Old English take a word for ‘wood’ as their base; examples are *brim-wudu*, *flōd-wudu*, *sæ-wudu*, *sund-wudu* ‘sea-wood’ as well as *wæg-bord* and *wæg-pel* ‘wave plank’ (B-T). Similarly, the simplex nouns *bēam* ‘beam’ and *bord* ‘board’ can metaphorically designate ‘ship’; see B-T, s.v. *bēam*, sense IV, and *bord*, sense III; the *DOE*, s.v. *bord*, sense 2.

⁶⁵ *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, vol. VI: *MS D*, ed. by G. P. Cubbin (Cambridge, 1996), p. 80.

⁶⁶ See the *Corpus of Old English*, s.v. *hāran*. The specific charters are Sawyer nos 142, 179, 359, 378, 411, 412, 455, 470, 491, 508, 558, 560, 563, 609, 690, 695, 766, 800, 847, 881, 896, 911, 916, 962, 967, 969 (*apuldran*), 969 again (*wiðig*), 993, 999, 1001, 1006, 1010, 1272, 1314, 1380, 1542, and 1819.

growths on trunks and limbs.⁶⁷ The *feaxhār cwene* must be an old tree covered with lichens.

If this line of reasoning is correct, is there a way of deciding what particular kind of hoar-headed tree the riddler had in mind? I think there is. Old oak trees are often conspicuous for their abundant growths of lichens. They also host mistletoe, an epiphyte that is specific to oak and that might contribute to its hoary aspect. The knight-errant Sir Gawain, in the Middle English alliterative romance *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, for example, passes through woods consisting of ‘hore okez ful hoge a hundreth togeder’⁶⁸ (huge, hoary oaks, a hundred together), and we may assume that full-grown oak trees of the Anglo-Saxon period were no less hoary in appearance than their modern or late medieval counterparts. More importantly, oak wood is specific to the shipwright’s trade. Although various woods were used in early boat building,⁶⁹ oak was the favoured timber for sturdy sea-going vessels in north-west Europe during the Anglo-Saxon period, just as it has been in more recent times. Material evidence from all over the North Sea culture zone confirms this observation. The Nydam boat from Schleswig, which can be dated to the period AD 350–400, is built entirely of oak, with planks eighty-two feet long by twenty inches broad. According to one authority, ‘it must have been in ships of the Nydam type that the Anglo-Saxons reached Britain’.⁷⁰ The Sutton Hoo ship, of the early seventh century, is likely to have been of oak, according to the best authorities.⁷¹ The ship from Kvalsund,

⁶⁷ See B-T (both the main volume and Toller’s *Supplement*), s.v. *hār*; note also the *OED*, s.v. *hoar*, sense 3: ‘The meaning may have been “grey” simply, or with lichen, and so “grey with age”, “old, ancient”.’

⁶⁸ *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, ed. by J. R. R. Tolkien and E. V. Gordon, 2nd edn rev. by Norman Davis (Oxford, 1967), p. 21 (line 743).

⁶⁹ See Peter Wagner, ‘Wood Species in Viking Age Shipbuilding’, in *Sailing into the Past: Proceedings of the International Seminar on Replicas of Ancient and Medieval Vessels, Roskilde, 1984*, with edited discussion by Ole Crumlin-Pedersen and Max Vinner (Roskilde, Denmark, 1986), pp. 130–37. Wagner makes reference (in this order) to oak, ash, birch, alder, willow, beech, lime, maple, and pine.

⁷⁰ A. E. Christensen, ‘Scandinavian Ships from Earliest Times to the Vikings’, in *A History of Seafaring, Based on Underwater Archaeology*, ed. by George F. Bass (London, 1972), pp. 159–80 (p. 164).

⁷¹ ‘Although it has proved impossible to make any formal identification of the wood used, the wood grain, preserved in the iron oxides from the rivets, has a denseness similar to that of oak and it is probable that oak planking was used’: Angela Care Evans and Rupert Bruce-

western Norway, roughly contemporary with the Sutton Hoo ship, is made of oak planking with ribs of pine.⁷² The Oseburg ship (c. AD 800) and the Gokstad ship (AD 850–900), from the Oslo-fjord area, are both built of oak throughout, while the Tune ship, a less well-preserved ship from the same locale (also AD 850–900), is all of oak except for the cross-beams and rudder, which are of pine.⁷³ Sometimes half-shaped oak timbers were stored submerged in water so that they would stay supple until such time as a ship was to be built. Examples are two pieces of oak meant for the prows of a large ship that were found in Sunnanå, Ryfylke, and are now to be seen in Stavanger Museum.⁷⁴

A complete and precise solution to Riddle 74 can now be offered. The elusive speaking object is an *āc*, or oak-tree, which has been cut down and made into a *bāt*, or boat.

One wonders why this solution has caused so much difficulty, for it is very much in keeping with riddling strategies used elsewhere in the Exeter Book. As will be discussed in a later chapter,⁷⁵ Riddle 73 (directly preceding the *āc/bāt* riddle) has as its answer the OE word *æsc* in two senses, (1) ‘ash tree’ and (2) ‘spear’. Although the text of Riddle 73 is marred by a large burn-hole that adds to its enigmatic character — evidently the mark of someone’s red hot poker set down to rest for a while — the speaker tells of how it grew up on a patch of open ground, where the earth and the clouds of heaven nourished it (it too was then *cwīc* ‘alive’, line 4), until such time as unidentified enemies killed it, hauled it away, and shaped it to their own design (*on bonan willan* ‘to the killer’s [or killers’] will’, verse 7a). Riddle 30, which also uses first-person address, describes a tree (OE *trēow*) that is variously considered as a living thing and as firewood, a cup, and a cross. Riddle 92, yet again using first-person address, has the solution *bōc* used first in the sense ‘beech tree’ and then in the sense ‘items made out of beech wood’ (with a pun on *bōc* in the sense ‘book’ and perhaps ‘rune-stick’). So one idea in the riddles is that of a tree (whether the oak, the ash, the beech, or any species) being transformed into a carpentered object of some kind (or a

Mitford, ‘The Ship’, ch. 5 (pp. 345–435) of *The Sutton Hoo Ship Burial*, ed. by Bruce-Mitford, 3 vols (London, 1975–83), I, 354.

⁷² Christensen, ‘Scandinavian Ships’, p. 164 col. 1.

⁷³ A. W. Brøgger and Haakon Shetelig, *The Viking Ships: Their Ancestry and Evolution*, trans. by K. John (Oslo, 1953), pp. 112, 147, and 154.

⁷⁴ Brøgger and Shetelig, *Viking Ships*, p. 108.

⁷⁵ Chapter 4, ‘Answering the Riddles in their Own Tongue’, at pp. 101–40 below.

set of such objects). This is a riddling strategy to be found elsewhere in the riddles and in Old English poetry of other genres than the riddle, as well.⁷⁶

How does this solution resolve the sex-change paradox of lines 1–2? The answer is simple, though it may seem a nasty trick. It depends on our declaring the answer to the riddle in the language of the riddler, not in modern English. Old English *āc* is a feminine noun. Old English *bāt* is a masculine noun. There is grammatical play here, as was possible since grammatical gender was emphatically tied to male and female categories in nature. As Ælfric writes in his *Grammar*,

Æfter gecynde syndon twa cyn on namum, *masculinum* and *femininum*; þæt is, werlic and wiflic. Werlic cyn byð *hic vir* ‘þes wer’, wiflic *hæc femina* ‘þis wif’. Þas twa cyn synd gecyndelice on mannun and on nytenum.⁷⁷

(As to gender: there are two genders in nouns, masculine and feminine; that is, male and female. The male gender is *hic vir* ‘this man’, the female is *haec femina* ‘this woman’. These two genders occur naturally among both human beings and beasts.)

Trautmann was of the opinion that play upon grammatical gender was basic to the art of personification in the riddles. ‘Die ae. rätseldichter nehmen es, wenn sie einen zu erratenden gegenstand als menschen einführen, sehr genau mit dem geschlechte: ein ding das seinem grammatischen geschlechte nach männlich ist, stellen sie immer als mann, eins das seinem grammatischen geschlechte nach weiblich ist, immer als frau dar.’⁷⁸ Although Trautmann overstates his case — the solution to a riddle can be a concept rather than a specific word, and hence a ‘right’ answer can be expressed by synonyms of one or another gender⁷⁹ — his claim holds true at least some of the time. No more support is needed to lend

⁷⁶ As Williamson notes (p. 345), ‘The motif of the flourishing tree, uprooted and carried off to another fate, is common to *Rids.* 71 [= K-D 73, *æsc*] and 51 [= K-D 53, solved at p. 143 below as *gealg-trēow*] and also to *The Dream of the Rood* (lines 28ff.), and perhaps to the lost beginning of *The Husband’s Message*. Williamson also observes that the author of *The Rune Poem* plays on this double meaning of ‘ash tree’ and ‘spear’ in those lines (81–83) that accompany the *æsc* rune. For discussion of that point, see pp. 282–83 below.

⁷⁷ *Ælfrics Grammatik und Glossar*, ed. by Julius Zupitza (1880; repr. with new foreword, Berlin, 1966), p. 18, lines 5–9, my capitalization and punctuation. Ælfric then defines the neuter gender as ‘naðor cynn, ne werlices ne wiflices’ (neither gender, neither male nor female).

⁷⁸ Trautmann, ‘Alte und neue Antworten’, p. 181. ‘The Old English riddlers, when they personify an object whose name is to be guessed, respect gender very carefully: a thing whose grammatical gender is masculine, they always represent as a man, one whose grammatical gender is feminine, always as a woman.’

⁷⁹ Whitman, *Old English Riddles*, pp. 135–36.

plausibility to my point. Tupper, in his more cautious discussion of grammatical gender as a clue to riddling, still cites at least fifteen possible instances where grammatical gender is 'invoked to the riddler's aid'.⁸⁰

The play in Riddle 74 between the feminine oak tree and the masculine boat is consistent with gender biases that were firmly entrenched in Anglo-Saxon society and that have not lost all their power in subsequent eras. Trees are rooted to one spot, just as women are traditionally associated with hearth and home. Ships — those of the Viking Age, in particular — are daring rovers, as men have been known to be. It is not surprising that systems of poetic diction that were in use among the skalds are based on these same metaphors. Just as trees can have feminine qualities, women can be called by the names of trees, as Snorri Sturluson notes in chapter 31 of his *Skáldskaparmál*.⁸¹ Ships, in a poetic context, are also sometimes spoken of in metaphorical terms as trees,⁸² and they often bear a masculine, heroic aura. To judge from a book on Viking ships that was published in the 1950s, this heroic resonance still plays a strong part in the aesthetics of seafaring:

A ship is built to swim the sea, to run through the water and shed it again; it should be strong to withstand the wind and the waves, and there should be room on board for people and goods. We all know how a ship labours in a storm, wrestling with the

⁸⁰ Tupper, p. lxxxix. Examples are cited at the end of Tupper's footnote on pages lxxxix–xc. In chapter 4 below, at pp. 105–08, I offer a more detailed discussion of grammatical gender in the riddles.

⁸¹ 'Woman is called in metaphorical speech by all feminine tree-names.' See also ch. 46: 'Woman is the Willow, or Dealer, of that gold which she gives; and the willow is a tree. Therefore, as is already shown, woman is periphrased [*sic*] with all manner of feminine tree-names.' *The Prose Edda of Snorri Sturluson*, trans. by Arthur Gilchrist Brodeur (New York, 1923), pp. 143 and 177, respectively. For examples of woman-kennings based on oak trees, see *Lexicon Poeticum Antiquae Linguae Septentrionalis*, ed. by Finnur Jónsson, 2nd edn (Copenhagen, 1966), s.v. *eik*, and for close discussion of one example, see Arthur G. Brodeur, *The Art of Beowulf* (Berkeley, CA, 1959), p. 249. Male tree-kennings are also commonplace, but that fact does not negate the evidence cited here.

⁸² Rudolph Meissner, *Die Kenningar der Skalden* (Bonn, 1921), notes in his section 85, on ship-kennings, that Old Norse court poets used words for tree or wood to designate the keel or mast of a ship, hence the ship itself (p. 208). This usage is consistent with what we find in the Latin exegetical tradition, where the image of the ship as a figure of *Ecclesia* 'the Church' rests upon the association of the *lignum* 'wood' of the Cross with the wood of which the ship is made. *Lignum* alone can thus serve as a synecdoche for 'ship', as Peter and Ursula Dronke point out in their Chadwick lecture *Growth of Literature: The Sea and the God of the Sea* (Cambridge, 1997), p. 12.

sea, rising and heeling over till all its timbers creak and groan. Then we see that a ship is alive, that it has a personal will of its own to take on a fight with the elements and see it through.⁸³

The strongly masculine ethos that permeates to the language of this description scarcely needs pointing out. As evoked by this expert in shipbuilding and sailing, the ship is no inert object. Rather it is a living thing that *swims, runs, sheds water, is large and strong, labours, wrestles, and groans aloud*. It has the unyielding moral character of a warrior who is keen to take on a fight and see it through to the end. So we may be right: the young maiden of line 1 is a slender oak sapling; the *feaxhār cwene* is a hoary old oak tree, able to provide timbers of the size and tensile strength required for the architecture of a ship; and the *rinc* or warrior is the strong, beautiful ship itself, battling the waves as it courses forward.

There remains one thorn in Riddle 74 still to be removed, however: the phrase *on āne tid* (line 2). The usual sense of this phrase, as previously noted, is 'at one time'. How can the speaker have been a sapling, a mature tree, and a ship at the same time?

It was not, of course. There are two quite different ways by which a riddler could declare this question to have no force. First, the riddle need not be punctuated as modern editors and translators have done. The problem of *on āne tid* disappears if we group the poem's phrases as follows, in modern translation: 'I have been a young maiden, a hoar-headed woman, and a peerless warrior. At a single time I flew among birds and swam in the sea; I dived under the wave, dead among fish, and stepped onto the shore. I had a living spirit.'⁸⁴ It is the ship's

⁸³ Brøgger and Shetelig, *Viking Ships*, pp. 104–05.

⁸⁴ My translations of *ic wæs* as 'I have been' (in the perfect tense) and *hæfde* as 'I had' (with pluperfect sense) deserve some justification. In the OE text, all six verbs are in the simple past tense. As Bruce Mitchell points out in 'Linguistic Facts and the Interpretation of Old English Poetry', *ASE*, 4 (1975), 11–28 (pp. 17–24), and in *Old English Syntax*, 2 vols (Oxford, 1985), 1, §§ 633–44, the Old English past tense is sometimes to be translated in Modern English by a perfect or pluperfect construction. Normally, if something other than the simple past is intended, either the semantic context of a word or the presence of a limiting adverb clarifies the temporal meaning of a verb. Although critics and translators of poetry have sometimes opted for pluperfect translations in a clause where nothing marks the verb as something other than the simple past, Mitchell argues that the burden of proof is on those who claim that the pluperfect is meant (*Old English Syntax*, 1, § 644). His argument, however, applies with less force to the riddles, whose art is to deceive. For examples of changes in the sense of past-tense verbs in *The Wife's Lament* and *The Dream of the Rood*, see Karl Wentersdorf, 'The Situation of the Narrator in the Old English *Wife's Lament*', *Speculum*, 56 (1981), 492–516, repr. in *Old*

motion that is single and undivided, not the speaker's identity as maiden, matron, and man. Perhaps everyone since Thorpe has been punctuating Riddle 74 the wrong way; a clever syntactic stratagem has worked.

Even if one rejects this choice and retains the riddle's conventional modern punctuation (which has nothing but convention to recommend it), all the demands of sense are satisfied if one looks hard at the wording of the phrase in question. *Tīd* is a vague term in the Anglo-Saxon temporal vocabulary. A *tīd*, or a space of time, can be as short as one hour. It can be as long as the twelve doleful years — *twelf wintra tīd* — during which Grendel ravages the deserted hall Heorot (*Beowulf* 147a). For Ælfric, *tīd* often denotes a particular festival time like Eastertide. That same author uses the word with reference to the whole period of thirty-three years during which Christ dwelled on earth incarnate.⁸⁵ In his *Grammar and Glossary* Ælfric glosses *post multum tempus* as *æfter mycelre tīde*, 'after a long *tīd*', so a single *tīd* can clearly be of long duration.⁸⁶ The whole history of the world, Ælfric declares in his first homily for Pentecost, can be divided into three *tīda*, three ages:

Preo tīda sind on þissere worulde: an is seo þe wæs butan æ; oðer is seo ðe wæs under æ; seo þridde is nu æfter Cristes tocyme.⁸⁷

(There are three ages in this world: the first was when there was no Law, the second was under Law [that is, Mosaic law], the third is now after the advent of Christ.)

It is nothing magical, then, for a sapling to become a tree and a tree to be turned into a ship in a single *tīd*. The reader may have been tricked into thinking that these different modes of being were simultaneous, when what the poet said is no more than that they existed *on āne tīd*.

The 'oak/boat' solution to Riddle 74, I therefore maintain, satisfies all the criteria that I have identified as constituting a practical basis for interpretation. The answer is *philologically exact*. No word has been twisted from its literal meaning or used in a special sense, apart from appropriate metaphorical extension. The

English Shorter Poems: Basic Readings, ed. by Katherine O'Brien O'Keeffe (New York, 1994), pp. 357–92 (at pp. 358–61).

⁸⁵ *Homilies of Ælfric: A Supplementary Collection*, ed. by John Collins Pope, 2 vols, EETS OS, 259–60 (Oxford, 1967–68), II, homily 14 (for the sixth Sunday after Pentecost), lines 1–2 (at p. 515).

⁸⁶ *Ælfrics Grammatik*, ed. by Zupitza, p. 270, lines 6–7.

⁸⁷ *Ælfric's Catholic Homilies, The First Series: Text*, ed. by Peter Clemoes, EETS SS, 17 (Oxford, 1997), p. 355.

answer is *complete and self-consistent*. Every word of the riddle, every image, has been accounted for in a manner that is free of contradiction. I hope that the answer is *elegant*, but of that the reader has to judge. What of its *contextual fit*? Is the proposed solution anachronistic, generically scandalous, or otherwise monstrous on contextual grounds? Absolutely not. None of the conventions of the riddle genre are violated by this solution, and some are aptly fulfilled. The solver's first task was to reject overly literal interpretations and thereby to crack into the riddler's system of metaphor and personification. The next task was to think historically: what relevant class of object was made from a living thing during the Anglo-Saxon period? The answer fairly leapt forth when we looked at the riddle's exact wording, with its sundry verbs of motion and its 'hoar-headed woman'. A bizarre bundle of contradictions soon resolved itself into a familiar object. Although I suspect that ocean-going ships were as special and unusual to most Anglo-Saxon villagers as bullet trains are to most English farmers today, they were well known. As for the oak, it was literally one of the building blocks of the Anglo-Saxons' world. It was as natural to their surroundings as hummingbirds were to Emily Dickinson's garden. And the idea of a tree being cut down and transformed into an object of some kind is clearly one that poets of this era delighted in.

As a way of clinching this argument, I will add two final pieces of evidence that will confirm the 'oak/boat' solution through the comparative method that was championed long ago by Tupper and that remains a keystone of the riddle-solver's art.⁸⁸

The first exhibit pertains to runology — another kind of riddling, as we have seen. The transformation of oak tree into ship that is the substance of Riddle 74 is not unique to that poem. It also serves as the organizing principle of stanza 25 of *The Rune Poem*. The author's strategy in that poem is first to give the symbol for each rune in the futhorc, then to provide a short verse passage that begins with that rune-name and that tells us something more about the item that is named. Here is the passage on the *āc* rune (stanza 25):

ƿ byþ on eorþan elda bearnum
flæscas fodor; fereþ gelome

⁸⁸ Tupper begins his learned discussion of the Exeter Book riddles with a section on 'The Comparative Study of Riddles' (pp. xi–xxviii), berating prior scholars for their neglect of this approach.

ofer ganotes bæþ; — garsecg fandap
 hwæþer ac hæbbe æþele treowe. (lines 77–80)⁸⁹

(The oak is food for flesh [i.e. it yields acorns to feed swine] for the children of men; often it travels over the gannet's bath [the ocean]; the open sea tests whether the oak keeps good faith.)

We see the oak tree in two moments of its existence: first in the woods, where it provides mast for swine,⁹⁰ and then turned into the timber of a ship that traverses the high seas, just as in Riddle 74. By synecdoche, the *āc* 'oak wood' is the ship itself.

The second exhibit relates directly to this same stanza. As Paul Sorrell has pointed out,⁹¹ stanza 25 of *The Rune Poem* is not only riddle-like in its structure, it is the next thing to a true riddle, for it represents an Anglo-Saxon analogue to an international riddle-type that is ascribed number 828 in Archer Taylor's standard collection *English Riddles from Oral Tradition*.⁹² Taylor type 828, 'The Dead Bears the Living: A Ship', has been recorded from Lithuania to Jamaica. Sorrell traces this riddle as far back in time as a seventh-century Latin riddle collection from Bobbio, northern Italy. Since Aldhelm, Abbot of Malmesbury (d. 709 or 710), is believed to have known this collection,⁹³ one can suppose a direct line of influence from the Bobbio text to *The Rune Poem* and the Exeter Book, although nothing in my argument depends on the ascription of either of these Old English texts to a specific source. What is important is that the folk riddle that underlies stanza 25 of *The Rune Poem* and that is worked into complex literary form in Exeter Book Riddle 74 has long been common currency. Folk riddles of Taylor type 828 are usually put into the voice of an imagined speaker, who

⁸⁹ Hallsall, p. 92. In keeping with my practice in chapter 7 below ('Runic Hermeneutics in *The Rune Poem*'), I do not include the OE name of the rune (*āc*) in line 1 on the grounds that it is not likely to have been a feature of the original manuscript (now no longer extant). Commenting on this stanza (p. 153), Halsall notes that 'the oak becomes a kind of amphibian', for it moves both *on eorþan* 'on earth' and *ofer ganotes bæþ* 'over the gannet's bath', 'upon the sea'. She also notes that seafaring is traditionally described in 'somewhat heroic terminology'.

⁹⁰ This theme is frequently represented in medieval manuscript illustrations of the labours of the months; for Anglo-Saxon examples, see James Carson Webster, *The Labors of the Month in Antique and Medieval Art* (Evanston, IL, 1938), pp. 53–55, plate 33b, item 3 (showing September from London, British Library, Cotton MSS, Julius A VI) and plate 34b, item 3 (showing September from London, British Library, Cotton MSS, Tiberius B V).

⁹¹ Sorrell, 'Oaks, Ships, Riddles'.

⁹² Archer Taylor, *English Riddles from Oral Tradition* (Berkeley, CA, 1951), pp. 309–11.

⁹³ Sorrell, 'Oaks, Ships, Riddles', p. 104 and n. 8.

declares one or another variation on the theme 'When I was alive, I fattened the living. Dead, I carried the living'.⁹⁴ A Latvian version omits the feeding motif and dispenses with the first-person singular mode of address but still draws attention to the towering tree that is the material source of the ship: 'Living, it bears a green crown. Dead, it bears the living.'⁹⁵ Riddle type 828 has many variant forms, but its regular answer is 'ship' or 'boat', a vessel that is made of dead wood and transports living people. The popularity of this international riddle type indicates a measure of 'folk' consent to the paradoxical wisdom that the author Anne Michaels ascribes to the character named Athos in her novel *Fugitive Pieces*: 'The great mystery of wood is not that it burns, but that it floats.'⁹⁶

This connection between Exeter Book Riddle 74 and Taylor riddle-type 828, 'The Dead Bears the Living', is instructive from the hermeneutical perspective that was adopted earlier in this chapter, for it neatly illustrates the point that the process of reading riddles — which is essentially the same process as problem-solving in general, if that argument is accepted — is an intellectual adventure that oscillates between a perceived problem, a set of critical assumptions, an imagined solution to that problem, and a set of tests. Each element in this web of relationships remains subject to modification through the process of feedback. Under the name 'the hermeneutical circle', this process of oscillating between assumptions and tentative conclusions is sometimes condemned as if it were a cycle to be escaped, when what it amounts to is the essential means by which human beings gain experiential knowledge in the world. As Paul Ricoeur has emphasized, the process of textual interpretation is never mechanical; rather, it is a complex, provisional enterprise that is grounded and humanized in moments of personal commitment:

Understanding is entirely mediated by the whole of explanatory procedures that precede it and accompany it [. . .]. We are not allowed to exclude the final act of personal commitment from the whole of objective and explanatory procedures that mediate it [. . .]. The 'hermeneutical circle' [. . .] remains an insuperable structure of knowledge when it is applied to human things, but this qualification prevents it from being a vicious circle.⁹⁷

⁹⁴ A Lithuanian example, from Taylor, *English Riddles*, p. 309.

⁹⁵ Taylor, *English Riddles*, p. 310.

⁹⁶ Anne Michaels, *Fugitive Pieces* (Toronto, 1996), p. 28.

⁹⁷ Paul Ricoeur, 'The Model of the Text: Meaningful Action Considered as a Text', in his *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics, II*, trans. by Kathleen Blamey and John B. Thompson (London, 1991), pp. 144–67 (p. 167).

Riddle 74 exemplifies this hermeneutical process. Once one accepts ‘ship’ as a possible solution, then one is in a position to perceive this riddle as a special example of a large class of riddles of similar structure and content. In turn, once this taxonomical triumph is achieved, then new insight follows that affects the contours of the problem itself. Line 5 of the Old English text can now be read in a different light, with the noun *ferð* taken in the plural and the verb *hæfde* read in a pluperfect sense. The phrase *hæfde ferð cwicu* can now be read as ‘I contained living spirits’.⁹⁸ This meaning is undoubtedly the right one from a comparative perspective, for in Taylor type 828 the ‘dead’ object carries a ‘living’ cargo; that is, the ship carries people. If no editor or translator of Riddle 74 (except for Trautmann, in his own way) has opted for a translation of *hæfde ferð cwicu* in the plural, that fact is not surprising, for no one has yet either entertained ‘ship’ as a solution or has noted the parallel with Taylor type 828. In other words, here is an instance where Ricoeur’s philosophy of interpretation is confirmed and where the comparative method in riddle analysis can offer a hint, and possibly even a correction, to textual philology.⁹⁹

I have no wish to pursue this plural reading of line 5 to the exclusion of the equally valid singular reading ‘I had a living spirit’. As we have seen, the latter meaning encodes an important clue to the speaker’s identity as an artefact made from what was once a living tree. What I do mean to suggest is that artful ambiguity is present in the grammar of line 5, just as artful ambiguity concerning gender is found in lines 1–2. A plurality of possible answers concerning the number of *ferð* in question is consistent with the riddler’s mission of tripping one up while teasing one with wisps and fragments of a solution, thus forcing only half-hearted acts of interpretive commitment on the part of readers who remain perplexed.

Riddling Out Implications

Before concluding this chapter I wish to develop two points of interest that have been raised thus far only in passing. First, through their teasing rhetorical

⁹⁸ A former graduate student of mine, Mary Bucholtz, once called my attention to the fact that this phrase can be read in the plural. When I subsequently became aware of international riddle-type 828, the validity of her suggestion was neatly confirmed.

⁹⁹ Since the comparative method as used here depends on the work of folklorists, my results contradict the conclusion that the relevance of late medieval, renaissance, or early modern English folklore to Old English riddles is ‘doubtful at best’ (Williamson, p. 22).

strategies, how do Riddle 74 and the other riddles of the Exeter Book illustrate the ludic vein in poetry in general? And second, through their commonplace subjects and their arresting use of metaphorical imagery, how do the riddles serve as a microcosm of the Anglo-Saxon thought-world?

In the early medieval context, the distinction between literary riddles and 'folk' riddling is actually more problematic than I have made it to appear. On the one hand, the Exeter Book riddles come down to us only as written texts. The voices of their posers, assuming there once were posers, cannot now be heard. On the other hand, Old English poetry in general was meant to be voiced aloud. It was a social medium to its core. Poets maintained the trope of bodily presence and physical voice long after Old English verse had developed from its oral roots and had become a supple medium for writers. Very often, Anglo-Saxon poets use the rhetoric of an oral/aural mode of address when there can be no question of speakers being present.¹⁰⁰ Poetry, like riddling, thus presents itself rhetorically as a public and interactive form of communication even when we encounter it on the manuscript page. From a sociological perspective, Old English poetry uses the language of metaphor and paradox so as to astonish in order to elicit the participative energies of the group.¹⁰¹

Although the wish to astonish is a crucial part of the literary riddle, that desire is by no means restricted to riddling, for in their style and form, the Exeter Book riddles are a quintessential example of the Anglo-Saxon *ars poetica*.¹⁰² From a formalist perspective, there is little that distinguishes them from any other type of short poem known to the Anglo-Saxons.¹⁰³ Riddles draw on the full resources

¹⁰⁰ Ward Parks comments on this oxymoron of 'speaking books' in his fine article 'The Traditional Narrator and the "I Heard" Formulas in Old English Poetry', *ASE*, 16 (1987), 45–66; cf. John Miles Foley, 'Texts That Speak to Readers Who Hear: Old English Poetry and the Languages of Oral Tradition', in *Speaking Two Languages: Traditional Disciplines and Contemporary Theory in Medieval Studies*, ed. by Allen J. Frantzen (Albany, NY, 1991), pp. 141–56.

¹⁰¹ Roger D. Abrahams, 'The Literary Study of the Riddle', *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 14 (1972), 177–97, argues that social riddling is a group enterprise, a test of wits that is open to all members of a community, as opposed to being a test of knowledge that is directed to an elite, as some have thought it to be.

¹⁰² Arguments along this line have been opened up by John F. Adams, 'The Anglo-Saxon Riddle as Lyric Mode', *Criticism*, 7 (1965), 335–48, and Matthew Marino, 'The Literariness of the Exeter Book Riddles', *NM*, 79 (1978), 258–65.

¹⁰³ Williamson (pp. 25–26), following earlier editors and commentators, distinguishes two main kinds of Old English riddle: one that begins with the conventional opening *Ic eom* or *Ic wæs* and one that begins typically with *Ic seah* or *Ic gefrægn* or *Wiht is*. Needless to say, these

of the poetic word-hoard; their syntax is interlaced in the customary poetic manner, which differs so noticeably from that of prose; and their phrasing is densely impacted to the point of being difficult to understand, even when one knows their answers. They are artful in their use of alliteration and other aural effects, as Andy Orchard has shown with reference to Riddle 74.¹⁰⁴ They use the conventional figures of rhetoric (or at least the figures of rhetoric can be traced in them, whether or not those figures are consciously deployed).¹⁰⁵ More than half the riddles use direct first-person address, as poetry in the lyric mode traditionally does.¹⁰⁶ Above all, the riddles are flamboyant in their display of figurative language. Their soul is metaphor. They thrive on personification and paradox. Some of them have an extraordinary exuberance, as does the storm riddle-complex (nos 1–3), which Charles W. Kennedy praises extravagantly as an example of the poet's art.¹⁰⁷ F. H. Whitman writes with similar enthusiasm about Riddle 5, which has the answer 'shield'. In his view, this riddle 'seems to have become more than itself, in its emotional life more a poem, with the riddling properties delegated to a position of secondary importance'.¹⁰⁸ The fact that Whitman can speak of this riddle as having an 'emotional life' tells us much about the unusual degree of poetic animation to be found in this genre. The Exeter Book riddles

markers are not sufficient to identify a riddle as such. Some riddles lack them, while the same phrases occur in poems that are not riddles. All scholars agree that riddles either state or imply a question, but that does not take us far towards a definition.

¹⁰⁴ Andy Orchard, 'Artful Alliteration in Anglo-Saxon Song and Story', *Anglia*, 113 (1995), 429–63 (at p. 437).

¹⁰⁵ Marie Nelson, 'The Rhetoric of the Exeter Book Riddles', *Speculum*, 49 (1974), 421–40.

¹⁰⁶ Eric G. Stanley, 'Old English Poetic Diction and the Interpretation of *The Wanderer*, *The Seafarer*, and *The Penitent's Prayer*', *Anglia*, 73 (1955), 413–66, repr. in *Essential Articles for the Study of Old English Poetry*, ed. by Jess B. Bessinger, Jr, and Stanley J. Kahrl (Hamden, CT, 1968), pp. 458–514 (at pp. 487–90), identifies the use of first person singular verbs as characteristic of the elegies and frequent in the riddles. Note further Bragg, *Lyric Speakers of Old English Poetry*. W. R. Johnson, *The Idea of Lyric: Lyric Modes in Ancient and Modern Poetry* (Berkeley, CA, 1982), devotes much of his first chapter, on the problem of defining lyric poetry, to a discussion of first-person address with attention to the 'I/thou' relationship that is established through use of the first-person singular pronoun.

¹⁰⁷ As Charles W. Kennedy, *The Earliest English Poetry* (Oxford, 1943), has remarked, 'Nowhere else in Old English verse do we find a treatment of natural phenomena comparable in length, realism, or descriptive skill' (p. 142).

¹⁰⁸ Whitman, *Old English Riddles*, p. 47.

are not just versified social riddles; they push the language of Old English poetry to its very limits.

Given this similarity between the art of the riddles and the art of Old English poetry in general, questions have naturally arisen concerning the genre of the poems that are inscribed in the later parts of the Exeter Book. Some scholars have wondered which riddles are really riddles, since some of them seem to give their answers away. Other poems in this section of the manuscript are riddle-like and yet lack the specific turns of phrase (such as *saga hwæt ic hatte* 'say what I am called') that mark out a riddle as such. Riddle 60, for example, which begins 'Ic wæs be sonde sæwealle neah' (I stood on the shore close by the sea-wall), has sometimes been classed as a lyric monologue (or part of a lyric monologue) as opposed to a riddle. The poetic monologue that immediately follows it, *The Husband's Message*, has sometimes been classed as a riddle or a cluster of riddles.¹⁰⁹ Among various readers who have regarded *Wulf and Eadwacer* as a riddle or who have compared it to the riddles, Anne Klinck finds riddle-like 'its brevity, its cryptic style, and its use of animals'.¹¹⁰ Arnold E. Davidson has suggested that, though not technically a riddle, *Wulf and Eadwacer* is meant to be deciphered on the basis of hints and allusions: 'the very fact that the poem can be read in so many different ways suggests that it might be ambiguous and perhaps deliberately so'.¹¹¹ Interpretations of *Deor*, too, 'tend to view the poem as a puzzle to be solved'.¹¹² The riddling qualities of *The Ruin* are familiar to its readers: the 'answer' to that poem has been thought to be the ruins of Bath, but that specific place-name is nowhere mentioned and may be deliberately suppressed. *The*

¹⁰⁹ For discussion of these two poems' genre and their vexed relationship, see Klinck, pp. 27, 56–60, and 197–99.

¹¹⁰ Klinck, p. 49. Compare the more extended discussion by James Anderson, 'Deor, Wulf and Eadwacer, and The Soul's Address: How and Where the Exeter Book Riddles Begin', in *The Old English Elegies: New Essays in Criticism and Research*, ed. by Martin Green (Rutherford, NJ, 1983), pp. 204–30.

¹¹¹ Arnold E. Davidson, 'Interpreting Wulf and Eadwacer', *Annuaire Mediaevale*, 16 (1975), 24–32. Similarly, Henk Aertsen suggests that the author of this poem 'allowed [. . .] multiple readings on purpose' so as to lend it the appeal of an enigma: 'Wulf and Eadwacer: A Woman's *cri de coeur* – for Whom, for What?', in *Companion to Old English Poetry*, ed. by Henk Aertsen and Rolf H. Bremmer, Jr (Amsterdam, 1994), pp. 119–44 (p. 120). On pp. 125–29 Aertsen discusses the 'riddle' interpretations of *Wulf and Eadwacer* in some detail.

¹¹² Alexandra Hennessy Olsen, 'Old English Women, Old English Men: A Reconsideration of "Minor" Characters', in *Old English Shorter Poems*, ed. by O'Brien O'Keeffe, pp. 65–83 (p. 69).

Wife's Lament, too, has recently been solved as a riddle and has been given the solution 'sword'.¹¹³ Wisely stopping short of such a radical reinterpretation of that difficult poem, Karl P. Wentersdorf still advocates reading that monologue as if it were a riddle. 'Today's reader seems compelled [. . .] to select one of a number of possible versions of the story line if there is to be a coherent evaluation of the poem as a work of art', he writes.¹¹⁴ In other words, first you read the *Wife's Lament* and opt for one of its possible plots; then you experiment with the implications of your choice and evaluate how coherent they are. This is the method of riddle solving — and, as we have seen, of interpretation in general¹¹⁵ — with the difference that with the riddles, the answer is a single word or item rather than a life story. Many of the speakers of the riddles, however, tell their own life story in brief, so that even this distinction is of limited value.

Nor is it just those Old English poems that are recorded in the immediate manuscript context of the riddles that flaunt an enigmatic quality. Poems from earlier parts of the Exeter Book partake of it as well. Benjamin Thorpe, that book's first modern editor, lamented that a number of these poems rely on, yet withhold, special knowledge that would render their meaning accessible. He found *Widsith* 'eminently calculated to excite, without gratifying, curiosity', while *The Wanderer* he found 'isolated, apart from every historic or legendary notice' that might explain it.¹¹⁶ *The Seafarer*, too, is notoriously enigmatic in its use of a system of paranomasia whereby words such as *dryhten* 'lord' and *drēamas*

¹¹³ Faye Walker-Pelkey, 'Frige hwæt ic hatte: "The Wife's Lament" as Riddle', *Papers on Language and Literature*, 28 (1992), 242–66.

¹¹⁴ Wentersdorf, 'Situation of the Narrator', pp. 357–58.

¹¹⁵ Armstrong, in *Conflicting Readings* (esp. pp. 17–18), argues that any act of interpretation depends on an initial 'act of faith' that permits exploration of a subject. He accepts that different interpreters may opt for different initial stances, so that all that is available to them in the end is consistency within a system, not absolute truth. By arguing that one's initial choice of assumptions is an ethical act that may have political consequences, he aligns himself with Hirsch (and, with lesser emphasis, Ricoeur) as opposed to Fish. One could regard Armstrong's book as an effort to rationalize and humanize what could otherwise be a distastefully solipsistic relativism.

¹¹⁶ *Codex Exoniensis*, ed. by Thorpe, p. viii. More recently Richard North, in discussing the genre of *The Wanderer*, has concluded that 'riddle' seems 'a good term for this poem of a notably veiled allusive style': see his 'Boethius and the Mercenary in *The Wanderer*', in *Pagans and Christians: The Interplay between Christian Latin and Traditional Germanic Cultures in Early Medieval Europe*, ed. by T. Hofstra, L. A. J. R. Houwen, and A. A. MacDonald (Groningen, 1995), pp. 71–98 (p. 92).

'joys' are first used in a secular context and then in a spiritual one, where their sense is transformed. Guessing the literal content of *The Seafarer* is much like guessing the answer to a riddle.

The inclusion of a series of texts of this character in the Exeter Book suggests, though it cannot prove, that the compiler of that anthology had a fondness for poetry that offered a challenge to the reader and that in some way had to be 'solved'. Certainly it is an interesting fact that the riddles of the Exeter Book are untitled, and hence offer a genuine experience of mystification, whereas their Latin analogues, most often titled, hand their solutions away. If the compiler of the Exeter Book did have a taste for enigmas, then that person probably shared a set of aesthetic assumptions that had some general currency in Anglo-Saxon times. *The Dream of the Rood* (from the Vercelli Book) and *The Rune Poem* (from a manuscript destroyed by fire in 1731) are only two examples, among many that could be cited, of poems from other manuscript sources that pose a deliberate challenge to the reader, withholding basic information that has to be guessed.¹¹⁷ Only certain Old English poems are true riddles, but a large number of them challenge readers to use their wits in extraordinary ways. The experience of reading and solving the Exeter Book riddles is thus very much like that of reading practically any Old English poem. Not just from a rhetorical perspective but also from a phenomenological one, riddles are a distillation of the poetic art. This is not to deny their special generic characteristics. Riddles require a single answer that can be declared either 'right' or 'wrong', for example, while other poems ask for more complex or nuanced responses. Still, guessing the answer to a riddle is not the end of things; it is rather more like their start. 'After the riddles have been solved,' as has been noted more than once, 'they become most interesting.'¹¹⁸ Once you find what seems to be the answer, you go back through the

¹¹⁷ Both of these poems have been linked with the riddles. Martin Irvine examines *The Dream of the Rood* as a riddle-like text in 'Anglo-Saxon Literary Theory Exemplified in Old English Poems: Interpreting the Cross in *The Dream of the Rood* and *Elene*', in *Old English Shorter Poems*, ed. by O'Brien O'Keeffe, pp. 31–63 (at pp. 35–38). Halsall, pp. 25–26 and 85, concludes that the lost original of *The Rune Poem* did not include the names of the runes, only their graphic symbols (as is discussed in my chapter on that poem, at pp. 251–79 below). The poem would thus have been an exercise in cryptography, on top of its other challenges.

¹¹⁸ Elaine Tuttle Hansen, *The Solomon Complex: Reading Wisdom in Old English Poetry* (Toronto, 1988), p. 127, paraphrasing Marino, 'Literariness of the Exeter Book Riddles', p. 259. Throughout ch. 5 of her book (pp. 126–52), Hansen discusses the art of the Exeter Book riddles not with an eye to their solutions, but rather as poems with conventional features and as an ostensible speech situation. She likens the riddles to the charms, as well as to the wisdom

text, testing your answer against every detail and examining both that text and your own ordinary conceptual categories according to the insights that are provoked by your answer. This is essentially what we do when reading any demanding text. The result of this process of mental exploration is a revised knowledge of the world and one's place in it. J. R. Hall has described this process well, speaking of the enigmatic art of the Old English *Rune Poem*: 'Like a riddle-master, the rune-poet uses wordplay, antithesis, and ambiguity to challenge the reader to enlarge his perspective and deepen his sensitivity to the world in which he lives and moves and has his being.'¹¹⁹

The power that Hall ascribes to the rune-poet (and that other writers have ascribed to the riddle-master), I suggest, is no different from what is deployed by the poets of the Exeter Book in general.¹²⁰ When we first approach a poem like *Wulf and Eadwacer* or *The Seafarer*, we are likely to be baffled by the way it plunges us into the midst of an unknown scene. Then at some point in our reading, if all goes well, we realize what scene is invoked, what plot is unfolding, what theme is being addressed. Armed with this knowledge (or, more cautiously, furnished with this hypothesis), we then go back to the beginning of the poem and read through it again, understanding it with pleasure if our proposed 'answer' works out well, while perhaps still enjoying a stringent hermeneutical challenge if it does not.

What I am suggesting is that there is something to be gained from considering Old English poetry in general as a form of play. At every level of magnitude from the kenning to the story line, one can see in it the workings of the 'double

debate or monologue, and she discusses these various genres within the general category of 'wisdom literature', a class of writings that (in her view) challenges the categories through which people construct and talk about reality. Similarly, Wim Tigges, 'Snakes and Ladders: Ambiguity and Coherence in the Exeter Book Riddles and Maxims', in *Companion to Old English Poetry*, ed. by Aertsen and Bremer, pp. 95–118, approaches riddles and maxims as two entries to a single body of knowledge or set of perceptions. One may still wish to ask: are the qualities often associated with 'wisdom literature' confined to that class of writings, or are they characteristic of poetry in general?

¹¹⁹ J. R. Hall, 'Perspective and Wordplay in the Old English *Rune Poem*', *Neoph*, 61 (1977), 453–60 (p. 458).

¹²⁰ *The Rune Poem* is riddle-like but is not part of the Exeter Book. On the other hand, some of the poems included in the Exeter Book are not particularly enigmatic. My generalization therefore applies not exactly to this one poetic codex, but rather to a type of poetry that is featured prominently there.

task of revealing and concealing' that is the special mode of the riddles.¹²¹ To speak of poetry as play is not a new departure, of course. Johann Huizinga described poetry in terms of game theory nearly fifty years ago in his classic study *Homo Ludens*, which called attention to the origins of culture itself in play.¹²² More recently Wolfgang Iser has mounted a similar argument from a contemporary phenomenological perspective. In his view, 'authors play games with readers, and the text is the playground'.¹²³ The formalized structures of poetry — the special diction, syntax, and rhetoric that are characteristic of all poetic languages — serve to open up the play space. Conventional formulas, such as *ic wæs, ic seah, ic gehyrde*, or *wē gefrignon* in the Old English context, announce the start of the game. The disfigurement of language that is such an overt and pleasurable part of much early poetry, alienating verse from the language of everyday life, alerts readers that a ritualized ludic activity has begun. The process of reading a literary text of any kind is thus an activity akin to what children or any of us do in rule-governed games, where the object is not simply to win or lose but rather to extend ourselves, through imaginative role-playing, into new configurations of reality.

Conclusion: Poetry as Evidence for World View

My argument thus far can be summarized as follows. Although social riddling is sometimes dismissed as a mere pastime, the Anglo-Saxon literary riddle can be regarded as a kind of 'pure' poetry that depends for its effect less on its readers getting the right answer than on their engagement with the poetics of riddle production. Paradoxically, through phrases like *saga hwæt ic hatte* 'say what my name is' — as if a flesh-and-blood person were in a position to hear this command and respond to it — the literary riddles of the Exeter Book make strong gestures towards face-to-face communication. In this regard the riddles are no different from Old English poetry in general, which regularly 'speaks' to its

¹²¹ Nelson, 'Rhetoric of the Exeter Book Riddles', p. 424.

¹²² Johann Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*, trans. by R. F. C. Hull (1949; repr. London, 1970, with introduction by George Steiner), ch. 7 ('Play and Poetry', pp. 141–58). On pp. 156–58 Huizinga discusses riddles and poetry as two closely related forms of expression.

¹²³ Wolfgang Iser, *Prospecting: From Reader Response to Literary Anthropology* (Baltimore, MD, 1989), p. 250.

‘audience’ as if it were being voiced aloud in a social situation. In its brevity, its use of the first-person voice, and its reliance on metaphor, personification, and paradox, Riddle 74 is a distillation of the Anglo-Saxon poetic art — an art that thrives on the fiction that it is a gift of words, an act of verbal exchange.

Since written literature has never wholly shed this underlying fiction of orality,¹²⁴ the process of reading the Exeter Book riddles thus typifies the process of reading poetry in general. No matter if we are reading Riddle 74 or *The Dream of the Rood*, Dickinson’s poem ‘1463’ or any of a number of other modern lyrics. Whatever poem we turn to, to the extent that the author addresses an imagined audience and conceals information at the same time as he or she reveals it, we are invited to take part in a play of the text that stretches our intellectual faculties beyond their usual limits. It is only to be expected that the criteria by which we can reasonably judge correctness in riddling are no different from the criteria by which interpretations of any kind can be tested. Riddles are not unique. In their compactness, they provide an entry to the most basic hermeneutical issues.

The last point that I wish to make, even if briefly, is that study of the riddles has much to contribute to our understanding of the Anglo-Saxons’ world view. The sense in which I am using that term should perhaps be explained.

Anthropologists and folklorists have long been accustomed to analysing what is special about a people’s ‘outlook on life’, ‘*Weltanschauung*’, or ‘vision of the world’. As is now recognized, study of a people’s ‘outlook on life’ also includes how they are implicated in the world that they perceive and that they partially construct through their imaginings. The present concept of ‘world view’ thus encompasses a people’s strategies of selfhood as well as their concept of all that constitutes external reality. It is widely assumed that world view is patterned, not random, and that all the elements of a culture (including ‘kinship data, grammar, child-rearing details, agricultural techniques, or any one of a thousand bits and pieces of culture’, to quote the well-known folklorist Alan Dundes)¹²⁵ are

¹²⁴ We still routinely speak of an author’s ‘audience’, for example, as if readers were listening to someone speaking rather than deciphering visual symbols. Note on this phenomenon Walter J. Ong, ‘The Writer’s Audience is Always a Fiction’, *PMLA*, 90 (1975), 9–21, as well as the studies cited in note 100 above.

¹²⁵ Alan Dundes, ‘Thinking Ahead: A Folkloristic Reflection of the Future Orientation in American Worldview’, *Anthropological Quarterly*, 42 (1969), 53–71, repr. in his *Interpreting Folklore* (Bloomington, IN, 1980), pp. 69–85 and 264–65 (p. 70). Other influential studies of world view include Robert Redfield, ‘Primitive World View and Civilization’, in his *The Primitive World and its Transformations* (Ithaca, NY, 1953), pp. 84–110, and Clifford Geertz, ‘Ethos, World-view and the Analysis of Sacred Symbols’, *Antioch Review*, 17 (1957), 421–37,

potentially subsumed in this patterning. World view is largely invisible to those who share it, for people do not normally have an anthropologist's vantage point on their own culture and cannot easily stand outside their own mind in order to observe it.

For scholars of cultures that are remote from us either spatially (for example, the Fiji Islands) or temporally (for example, Anglo-Saxon England), the value of studying world view is twofold. First, it may promote insight into those bedrock structures of thought and feeling that form the basis of private identity and that justify the institutions of social power in any given time and place. Second, it may enhance understanding of any one element of culture — this hoe, this festival, or this text — by showing how that element is expressive of a much larger system of meaning.

Partly because of their utterly mundane literal content, partly because of their flamboyant use of figures of speech, the Exeter Book riddles provide an illuminating entry to the world view of the Anglo-Saxons. More than any other documents from their time, they play with the bric-a-brac of daily life. They give life to things that are so often seen that they are no longer seen. As has long been recognized, the riddles 'stand forth as the most important contemporary contributions to our knowledge of the everyday life of their time'.¹²⁶ They evoke image after image that has no place in the loftier world of heroic poetry or scriptural narrative: the four teats of the milch-cow, for example, or the pedlar's pack of wares. Wim Tigges claims that in their 1630 lines of verse — five per cent of the extant Old English poetic corpus — riddles constitute '*the* environment of images *par excellence*' of the earliest English poetry.¹²⁷ It is thus to the riddles that

repr. in *Every Man his Way: Readings in Cultural Anthropology*, ed. by Alan Dundes (Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1968), pp. 301–15. Aron Gurevich, *Historical Anthropology of the Middle Ages*, ed. by J. Howlett (Chicago, 1992), ch. 1 (pp. 3–20), reviews the importance of 'worldview' in recent historiography under the guise of many different names, including *mentalité*, 'collective consciousness', and 'picture of the world'. Randal S. Allison, 'Worldview', in *Folklore: An Encyclopedia of Beliefs, Customs, Tales, Music, and Art*, ed. by Thomas A. Green, 2 vols (Santa Barbara, CA, 1997), II, 849–50, defines that concept as 'The way in which a person or group views the world; the complex interaction of culture, language, and mental constructs utilized to make sense of the world around us' (p. 849).

¹²⁶ Tupper, p. lxxxvi.

¹²⁷ Tigges, 'Snakes and Ladders', p. 95, with reference to a phrase, 'environment of images', that Alvin Lee uses to good effect in his book *The Guest-Hall of Eden: Four Essays on the Design of Old English Poetry* (New Haven, CT, 1972), p. 231.

one naturally turns if one wishes to discover how the Anglo-Saxons thought and felt about the basic elements of their life-world.

The riddles remind us that no object is merely an object. When singled out by a poet's or artist's attention, an ordinary thing becomes luminous with spirit. Very often it takes on a human face and form. This is what happens in the riddles, where 'dead' objects speak about their lot in terms that living people will understand. By endowing with soulful sentience a single reed growing by the shore, for example, a poet not only imparts information about the natural world but also communicates human feelings of loneliness. Sometimes the emotions that are lodged in the riddles can only be recognized if one has competence in the power relations that shaped the Anglo-Saxon social world. The riddles stress lordship, obedience, fear. They dwell on the service of man to master.¹²⁸ F. H. Whitman sees in them a 'preoccupation with valour and suffering' that matches their concern with 'the spirit of comitatus'.¹²⁹ As Wim Tigges has remarked, the riddles thus have a social function, for they 'confirm the social relationships of their day [...] by metaphorically applying these to randomly presented phenomena or objects'.¹³⁰

Edward B. Irving, Jr, agrees that useful information can be extracted from study of the riddles.¹³¹ By 'useful information' he not only is speaking of ornithology, leather-working, the technology of script, and countless other aspects of the Anglo-Saxons' material world. He also means information with a bearing on the history of human sensibility, particularly among people of ordinary status. If we take the anthropomorphic figures of the riddles as surrogates for real people, then the riddles have much to say about downtrodden members of society. There is the battered shield who is beaten down without heroic recourse in Riddle 5, for example; or there is the fox or vixen of Riddle 15, who runs and hides and fights desperately to defend its young; or there is the sword of Riddle 20, who is a peerless warrior and yet also, in Irving's view, 'a vain and swaggering murderer, shielded by the protection of an indulgent patron'.¹³² These poems give shelter to elements that find no place in the Anglo-Saxon heroic world.

¹²⁸ Tupper, p. lxxxviii; Tigges, 'Snakes and Ladders', p. 99; Hansen, *Solomon Complex*, pp. 137–38.

¹²⁹ Whitman, *Old English Riddles*, p. 51.

¹³⁰ Tigges, 'Snakes and Ladders', p. 109.

¹³¹ Edward B. Irving, Jr, 'Heroic Experience in the Old English Riddles', in *Old English Shorter Poems*, ed. by O'Brien O'Keeffe, pp. 199–212 (at p. 199).

¹³² Irving, 'Heroic Experience', p. 205.

Irving sees in the riddles a robust cynicism that complements the effulgent surfaces of war and weaponry that are held up for admiration in such poems as *Beowulf* and *Waldere*.¹³³

The riddles not only present objects in anthropomorphic guise; they also arrange them in anthropocentric systems of order. Virtually everything that they name has a function. What the riddles prize above all is the way things turn to the welfare of humankind. Rarely is the 'raw' stuff of nature introduced (a deer's antlers, an ox's hide) without its being brought into relation to the 'cooked' elements of culture (a pair of inkwells, a set of leather goods).¹³⁴ The riddles thus domesticate the elements of nature and turn them to human use.

As anthropologists have stressed, it is in part through posing and solving riddles that people test the conceptual boundaries of their world, rendering abstract relations concrete and endowing common things with sentience. Through such games, people construct the world of thought and feeling that they inhabit.¹³⁵ By composing and resolving poetry in general, people do much the same thing. The Anglo-Saxons were no different from ourselves in that regard. Their riddles — and their poetic texts in general — not only mirror a world; they constitute a mental world as well.

Riddle 74 can serve as an example of this cosmoplastic tendency. Basic features of the Anglo-Saxon world view are on display here in a mere five lines of verse. A speaker celebrates its free movement in the open air, on the sea, and on the earth. What if the speaker is a ship? Cannot a ship, like a person, delight in the power of motion? A ship is not only mobile, however; it is also *ænlic*. It is a singularly beautiful (and expensive) product of human craftsmanship. As such,

¹³³ In an article published only a year after Irving's (and hence that does not take his arguments into account), E. G. Stanley, 'Heroic Aspects of the Exeter Book Riddles', in *Prosody and Poetics in the Early Middle Ages*, ed. by M. J. Toswell (Toronto, 1995), pp. 197–218, discusses the vocabulary in the riddles that seems to recall an earlier heroic world. He stresses that the Anglo-Saxon vernacular enigmatists belonged to that world 'only bookishly, like the Anglo-Saxonists and Germanists of this century and the last' (p. 205).

¹³⁴ Here I draw on terminology favoured by the French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss in *The Raw and the Cooked*, trans. by John and Doreen Weightman (Chicago, 1990), originally published as *Le cru et le cuit* (Paris, 1965).

¹³⁵ See Michael D. Lieber, 'Riddles, Cultural Categories, and World View', *JAF*, 89 (1976), 255–65. Barley, 'Structural Aspects of the Anglo-Saxon Riddle', writes about riddles from an anthropological perspective with attention to their world-building capabilities, as does Ian Hamnett, 'Ambiguity, Classification, and Change: The Function of Riddles', *Man*, n.s., 2 (1967), 379–92.

it shouts out its owner's wealth and social status. The ship is not solely admired as artefact and symbol, however. It is also seen in relation to the stuff out of which it was made: the living oak tree out of which it was hewn by the woodsman's effort and the carpenter's skill. That oak tree too is presented in anthropomorphic terms. She is a woman who has grown from slender, virginal youth to grey-headed old age. The epithet *feax-hār* with which the speaker's life as a mature tree is evoked reveals the poet's eye for an aged oak as an observable thing in nature, variegated in appearance. Nature, material culture, and human spirit here cohabit a single body. Moreover, delight in the physical world is consistent with an appreciation of mutability. Through its paradoxes, the riddle neatly expresses the impending presence of death in life, the lingering traces of life in death, the constant inconstancy of earthly things. Equally typically, Riddle 74 is self-conscious about its own use of language. It plays with grammatical duplicity as well as with metaphor. Riddle 74 thus explores the ways in which, in sites opened up by its inevitable ambiguities, speech enables the language-user to flirt with the actions and things that words denote.

Even the five lines that constitute Riddle 74 thus point unerringly to how the Anglo-Saxons conceived of a human being as a creature who delights in *physical movement* and who dreads confinement; who uses the divine gift of language to *speak* the world into both 'real' and contrary-to-fact configurations; who identifies aesthetic beauty with the *craftsmanship* that shapes the things of nature into artful forms; who sees the whole of nature as a field for human *use*; who seeks to *control* both the external world and other human beings through exercise of wealth and art; and who freely acknowledges, for good and for ill, both the *mutability* of existence and the liberating *potential* in things whereby the future is latent in the present, like the idea of a spear or of a plank embedded in a tree, while the past continues to reside in the present, as happens on every occasion when the poet or seer breaks into speech or the author lifts his pen. These conceptions (and others like them) were not unique to the Anglo-Saxons, of course. To some degree, though not to the extent that we may naively think, they are perhaps 'simply human'. Still the strong effort of scholarship should always be to historicize such conceptions as 'reality', 'the world', or 'human nature' so as to expose them as aspects of world view — that is, as period-specific creations of language that become accepted so widely that they achieve the status simply of truth.

Whether or not there is merit in the argument that poetry itself is a form of riddling play, whether or not anyone will sign up for my four-step programme for validity in interpretation, and whether or not the claim is persuasive that even one very short poem can encode essential elements of the Anglo-Saxon world

view, I hope that readers have profited from the exercise of close reading that has been undertaken here. Among the pleasures of reading the poetry of any period is that provided by close scrutiny of a single text. Sometimes, as with poets of the stature of Dickinson, the pleasures of reading increase in proportion to the challenge a text provides. Since the Exeter Book riddles are not only artful but, taken collectively, have been called ‘certainly the most difficult text in the field of Anglo-Saxon’,¹³⁶ their pleasures for some readers must be substantial.

Even if, for reasons that I cannot anticipate, my proposed ‘oak/boat’ solution to Riddle 74 is rejected, I hope that the process of playing with that text may still have been rewarding, with its byways among grammar and semantics, birds and boats, metaphors and metamorphoses. Some readers who delight in open-endedness may even be content to leave Riddle 74 unsolved, for opting for one interpretation naturally means opting out of others. As Iser remarks, any decision about the meaning of a text ‘will eclipse countless aspects brought to view by the constantly shifting, constantly interacting and hence kaleidoscopically iterating positions of the game, so that the game itself runs counter to its being brought to an end’.¹³⁷ In other words, the process of playing the Exeter Book game may be more fun than winning it. If the solution that I have offered gains enough converts to pass Armstrong’s ‘intersubjectivity’ test, however, then a degree of closure will have been brought to a mental contest that has baffled some very learned and thoughtful people over the past one hundred and fifty years. We will have unriddled the quick and the dead; and that, I think, is enough for now.

¹³⁶ Tupper, p. vii.

¹³⁷ Iser, *Prospecting*, p. 252.

GETTING THE EXETER BOOK RIGHT

In a note at the start of the preceding chapter, I refer to several publications that describe the Exeter Book. One of these is an encyclopedia article that could be clarified in one regard and needs correction in another. While neither of these problems looms large in the grand scheme of things, they should be addressed here seeing that certain poems from the Exeter Book constitute the centrepiece of this book.

First, the clarification. When referring to an eleventh-century inventory that itemizes the manuscripts that Bishop Leofric donated to Exeter Cathedral in 1072, Alexander Rumble calls attention to an item that is generally taken to designate the Exeter Book. In the original language of that donation, the item is described as ‘*i. mycel englisc boc be gehwilcum þingum on leoðwisan geworht*’.¹ Rumble translates that passage as follows: ‘i great English book about all things, composed in verse’.² Several parts of this translation might cause misunderstanding. The grapheme ‘i’ (with no superscript dot, but set off by a pair of points to mark it as an abbreviation) represents the Old English numeral *ān* ‘one’, not the letter ‘i’, as specialists will know but as perhaps should be made clear. The adjective *englisc* refers to the book’s language, not nationality. Perhaps this point too can be taken for granted, but it deserves to be made explicit, for the fact that the book is written in English is unusual enough for the cataloguer to have thought it worth mentioning. Most ‘English’ books housed in the English libraries of this time were written in Latin; some ‘English’ books were written in French; some were written alternately in two or three of these languages — but not the Exeter Book, which consists entirely of English poems

¹ Krapp and Dobbie, p. ix; cf. Muir, 1, 2–3.

² Rumble, ‘Exeter Book’, in *Medieval England*, p. 285, col. 2.

with the exception of one Latin riddle. As for the adjective *micel*, its primary sense is physically 'big' rather than 'great' in a less embodied sense. This may be thought so subtle a distinction as not to be worth mentioning. More importantly, though, what the plural phrase *bē gehwīlcum þīngum* means is 'concerning several things', not 'about all things'.³ The contents of the Exeter Book are comprehensive, but not infinitely so. So what this item on the Bishop's list of donations consisted of was 'a big book, written in English, about miscellaneous topics, composed in verse'.⁴

As for the correction, it pertains to facts rather than semantics. When calling attention to the runes that are interspersed here and there among the poems of the Exeter Book, Rumble refers to an **H**-rune in Riddle 36: 'in Riddle 36, the H-rune stands for *Homo*'.⁵ While I find myself wishing that this were true (for it would buttress an argument that I will make in later chapters regarding the potential variability of the rune-names), there is no **H**-rune in Riddle 36. The lower-case roman letter *h*, however, is used, apparently, to stand in for the word *homo*, immediately following the Old English equivalent of that word, *monn*. This part of Riddle 36 is an extremely difficult passage to construe, in part because of the scribal errors it is thought to contain, but there are no runes there.

Although it is hard to see how someone who is such an expert palaeographer as Dr Rumble could make this error since a facsimile of the Exeter Book is available,⁶ one factor that can contribute to mistakes of this kind is the editorial practice of transliterating runes into their roman equivalents. In his recent and now standard edition of the Exeter Book, for example, Muir transliterates all the runes into roman characters.⁷ If users of an edition of Old English poetry cannot

³ Toller, s.v. *gehwīlc*, sense II(2).

⁴ Humphrey Wanley interpreted Bishop Leofric's inscription correctly long ago; why should we not do so today? On p. 279 of his *Librorum Veterum Septentrionalium, qui in Angliae Bibliothecis extant* (Oxford, 1705), he translates Leofric's Old English accurately into Latin as 'Unus grandis liber Anglicus (*sc.* Anglo-Saxonicus) de diversis rebus Poeticè scriptus'.

⁵ Rumble, 'Exeter Book', in *Medieval England*, p. 286, col. 1.

⁶ See Abbreviations, s.v. 'the Exeter Book facsimile'. Admittedly, this rare and valuable book is not easily available; my own university library has only a microfilm copy.

⁷ I refer to the printed edition published in the year 2000. Muir's prospective electronic edition seems not yet to have appeared (as of late 2005), and I do not know if it will differ from the printed edition in this regard. If it includes a complete digitized facsimile of the manuscript, the issue of how the runes are represented in the printed edition will cease to be of much importance.

at a glance distinguish runes from roman letters, then they are less likely to understand all aspects of a text. Both the ASPR edition of the Exeter Book and Klinck's edition of the Old English elegies are preferable to Muir's in this regard, for they display runes as runes. Of course, an editor's practices can be dictated by the economics of publishing. Even if an editor's hands are tied in this regard, however, there still may be ways to display the true manuscript readings. Klinck's inclusion of photographic plates showing the original text of every poem included in her edition, for example, is an exemplary practice for other editors to follow, when feasible.

EXETER BOOK RIDDLE 55: SOME GALLOWS HUMOUR

Exeter Book Riddle 55 (beginning ‘Ic seah in healle, þær hæleð druncon’)¹ presents its readers with an intellectual challenge that has not yet been resolved. The main interpretive problem regards the identity of a practical wooden object that resembles a gallows (for it is called a *wulfhēafod-trēow* ‘wolf’s-head tree’ or ‘gallows’, 12a)² and that at the same time is associated with gold, silver, and some weaponry, including one or more swords (3b–4, 12b–14a). To complicate this picture, the object is associated in some way with the cross (it is a *rōde tacn* ‘sign of the rood’, 5a).

Building on a somewhat conflicted history of prior scholarship, the editor of the most recent edition of the Exeter Book, Bernard J. Muir, concludes that ‘some sort of sword-rack or [sword]-box seems intended, which was perhaps in the shape of a cross and gallows (a *t*-shape)’, but he finds the riddle so opaque

¹ Here and elsewhere I follow Krapp and Dobbie’s numeration. Because of differences of scholarly opinion concerning where textual boundaries lie, the riddle is numbered 53 in Williamson’s edition as well as in Hans Pinsker and Waltraud Ziegler, *Die altenglischen Rätsel des Exeterbuchs* (Heidelberg, 1985). It is no. 56 in Tupper and no. 55 in Muir.

² The compound noun *wulfhēafod-trēow* occurs only here in the Old English corpus. The definition B-T gives for it (in that normalized spelling, which I shall adopt) is a tentative one: ‘A cross (?)’. As Tupper points out, however, *wulf-hēafod* or *wulfes-hēafod* was ‘the legal expression for an outlaw, who may be killed like a wolf, without fear of penalty’ (Tupper, p. 191, drawing on B-T, s.v. *wulf*, sense 1.a). This reasoning is accepted by Williamson, pp. 303–04. The noun *wulfhēafod-trēow* ought therefore to have the primary sense ‘gallows’, with perhaps the secondary meaning ‘cross’. Similarly, the noun *wearg-trēow* means ‘gallows’, though it can also serve as a term for ‘cross’. Bosworth and Toller’s definition of *wearg-trēow* as ‘the accursed tree, a gallows, gibbet, cross’ is unsatisfactory, for the gallows itself is neither a tree nor accursed; rather, the gallows is a wooden structure (*trēow*) that is used to hang criminals (*weargas*).

that its solution must remain ‘uncertain’.³ On the other hand, drawing on a different thread of prior criticism, the editors of the most recent German edition of the riddles, Hans Pinsker and Waltraud Ziegler, come down squarely for *kreuz Christi* ‘the holy Rood’ as the solution and shape both their text and their translation in accord with that view.⁴ Craig Williamson, the editor of an outstanding English-language edition of the riddles, takes this one to be ‘a stumper’ and adds: ‘It seems to be based on linguistic or cultural knowledge lost to the modern world. [. . .] Short of transporting ourselves back to the Anglo-Saxon hall, we may never know [its answer]’.⁵ Keith P. Taylor, the author of the most sustained separate study of this text, is yet more emphatic in his assessment of its difficulties. While offering a new solution of his own (to be discussed in due time), Taylor finds Riddle 55 ‘arguably the most puzzling of the riddles’ and, again, ‘certainly the most challenging of the riddles to be found in the Exeter Book’.⁶

What I wish to show is that while a solution to Riddle 55 along the lines suggested by Muir and some other scholars is indeed correct, that solution can be made more exact, and can be proposed with far greater confidence, if one reads this sixteen-line poem with precise attention to its phrasing as well as to the material culture of its time. Notably, the material culture of its time included byrnie (that is, coats of mail) as well as swords, and I will suggest that one or more byrnie form an indispensable part of the riddle’s solution (thereby taking us far away from the idea of a liturgical cross). As for the idea of some kind of ‘cross or gallows’ shape being present, however, we will want to investigate this possibility with caution, for there is a difference between crosses and cruciform imagery. Similarly, it may prove helpful to distinguish literal gallows from metaphorical ones. The discussion that follows, I believe, will lead to a solution to Riddle 55 that satisfies all the conditions of the text. At the same time, it will cast new light on the rhetorical strategies of a poet who did his best to tease and delight his readers through the riddler’s characteristic art of defamiliarizing an everyday object so as to make it seem strange and wonderful.

³ Muir, II, 662.

⁴ Pinsker and Ziegler, *Die altenglischen Rätsel*, pp. 275–76; on their treatment of the text, see below, note 15 and note 29.

⁵ Craig Williamson, *A Feast of Creatures* (London, 1983), pp. 196–97.

⁶ Keith P. Taylor, ‘Mazors, Mead, and the Wolf’s-head Tree: A Reconsideration of Old English Riddle 55’, *JEGP*, 94 (1995), 497–512 (p. 497).

The Text

To begin with, it will be helpful to cite the full text of the riddle (here called a *giedd* 'song, poem, heightened utterance', 14b), together with a working translation of it. Riddle 55 begins with the *ic seah* 'I saw . . .' formula that is used twelve times in the Exeter Book riddles to introduce an object whose identity must be guessed:

- Ic seah in healle, þær hæleð druncon,
 on flet beran feower cynna:
 wrætlic wudutreow, ond wunden gold,
 sinc searobunden, ond seolfres dæl,
 5 ond rode tacn þæs us to roderum up
 hlædre rærde, ær he helwara
 burg abræce. Ic þæs beames mæg
 eaþe for eorlum æþelu secgan:
 þær wæs hlin ond acc ond se hearda iw,
 10 ond se fealwa holen; frean sindon ealle
 nyt ætgædre; naman habbað anne,
 wulfheafedtreo. Ðæt oft wæpen abæd
 his mondryhtne, maðm in healle,
 goldhilted sweord. Nu me þisses gieddes
 15 ondsware ywe se hine on mede
 wordum secgan hu se wudu hatte.⁷

Although translating a riddle in advance of knowing its answer is a hazardous enterprise, the following paraphrase of Riddle 55 is meant to be philologically exact:

- I saw in the hall, where men were drinking,
 four kinds of thing carried onto the floor:
 a splendid wooden object, and some twisted gold
 (treasure cleverly fastened!) and something made of silver,
 5 and the sign of the cross of Him who raised up a ladder
 to heaven for us before He shattered the citadel
 of the citizens of hell. In the presence of noblemen
 I can easily declare the fine elements of that wooden object:
 there was maple, and oak, and sturdy yew,
 10 and brown holly. All these things taken together
 are useful to their lord. They have a single name,
 the 'wolf's-head tree'. It has often obtained weapons
 for its liege lord, treasure in the hall,
 a gold-hilted sword. If there is anyone so bold

⁷ Muir, I, 324.

- 15 as to declare in words what this wooden object is called,
let him now give me an answer to this riddle.

Naturally, neither the Old English text nor my literal translation of it is devoid of problems.⁸ The most important of these, perhaps, is the handling of verse 2b, *fēower cynna*. With some clumsiness I have translated this phrase as ‘four kinds of thing’, thus leaving open the question as to whether we are dealing with a single object made up of four constituent parts or aspects or, alternatively, with four objects that are put on display together. While the noun *cynn* has many meanings, here it is best taken in the general sense ‘type, class, sort, kind (of people, things, properties, conditions, etc.)’.⁹

Nouns denoting ‘a wooden object of unspecified kind’ occur three times in the poem — *wudutrēow* (3a), *bēam* (7b), and *sē wudu* (16b) — and are a point of crucial interest, for whatever that object is, its true name must be the riddle’s solution.¹⁰ Each of the three nouns denotes a carpentered object of some kind. Although the only definition given by Bosworth and Toller for the first of them, *wudu-trēow*, is ‘a tree of the woods, a forest tree’,¹¹ what it must mean here (if I am not mistaken) is ‘a wooden object’; that is, the wood of a tree that has been cut and shaped into something. The compound noun *wudu-trēow* is thus a decorative equivalent of the simplex noun *trēow* when *trēow* denotes ‘tree as in roof-tree, saddle-tree, a piece of wood, a beam, log, stake, staff, cudgel’.¹² As for *bēam*, the reader is invited to take that noun either specifically as ‘a timber, beam, joist’ or, like *trēow*, in the broad sense ‘an object, or part of an object, made out of wood’.¹³ Since OE *bēam* (like its present-day reflex ‘beam’) normally denotes a

⁸ Certain problems that are peripheral to the interpretation of Riddle 55 can be ignored here. For example, I regard as inconsequential the punctuation of the text after 12a, where Muir prints a full stop, taking *þæt* as a personal pronoun, and where other editors (e.g. Krapp and Dobbie) print a comma, taking *þæt* as a relative pronoun. Likewise it does not matter to my interpretation if one prints *on mēde* (15b) as two words, taking *on* as a prepositional adverb bearing stress, or as a single verb *onmēde* (from *on-mēdan*) with stress on the second syllable, as some authorities (including B-T) have preferred.

⁹ The *DOE*, s.v. *cynn*, sense 5b.

¹⁰ This is made clear in lines 14b–16, which ask the reader to guess the identity of *sē wudu*.

¹¹ Bosworth and Toller, s.v. *wudu-trēow*.

¹² Bosworth and Toller, s.v. *trēow* (the neuter noun), sense IV. The Old Icelandic noun *tré*, similarly, denotes both ‘a tree’ and objects made of wood (Cleasby and Vigfusson, s.v. *tré*).

¹³ The *DOE*, s.v. *bēam*, senses 2 and 3, respectively. The editors of the *DOE* cite *bēam* as used in Riddle 55 under definition 3, adding in parentheses: ‘solution is uncertain: perhaps some kind of weapon holder, or perhaps a gallows’.

fairly substantial piece of wood,¹⁴ the object would seem to be a large one. The third of these synonyms, *sē wudu*, clearly denotes ‘something made of wood’.¹⁵ Elsewhere in the Old English records, *wudu* is used in this manner with reference to a ship, a loom (in the very next riddle, Riddle 56), some spears, and the cross. So these three nouns, when taken together, seem to denote neither ‘a tree’ nor the substance ‘wood’, but rather a wooden object that has been shaped or joined by the art of carpentry. The object is a useful one, we are told (10b–11a).

One can be sure, then, that the main item whose identity is to be guessed is a substantial, practical object made out of wood. A tantalizing clue is given, as we have seen: the object is a *wulfhēafod-trēow*. Although that triple compound noun is not attested elsewhere in Old English and so is a small riddle in itself, its constituent elements ‘wolf’, ‘head’, and ‘tree’ are commonplace and the word is not hard to interpret. ‘To bear the wolf’s head’ is to be an outlaw, while ‘a tree for outlaws’ is a gallows. Whatever the wooden object is, therefore, it must resemble a gallows whether in looks or function. The solution to the riddle is unlikely to *be* ‘the gallows’, however, for a gallows does not proffer weapons, it is not normally associated with gold and silver, and it would not normally be thought of as ‘useful’ in the sense that ordinary items are of use. So *wulfhēafod-trēow* must point us toward the solution metaphorically rather than literally.¹⁶

A few other textual difficulties deserve mention, though none is very significant. First, the phrase *for eorlum* ‘in the presence of noblemen’ (8a) is best taken as little more than a polite form of address to the implied audience of the riddle, whether listeners or readers, as in our phrase ‘ladies and gentlemen’; no actual persons of high rank need be present in this imagined test of wits.

Second, the word *æpelu* (8b) is a collective plural noun that refers to the excellent qualities that pertain to the object’s inherent nature.¹⁷ Since that noun

¹⁴ The meaning of OE *bēam* is discussed in chapter 6 below, at pp. 230–32.

¹⁵ Bosworth and Toller, s.v. *wudu*, I, sense 2a. Pinsker and Ziegler, *Die altenglische Rätsel*, translate *wudu* as *Baum* ‘tree’ rather than *Holz* ‘wood’, in accord with their understanding that the item to be guessed is a decorated cross.

¹⁶ It is worth keeping in mind that the English word ‘gallows’ has been used in modern times to denote a variety of objects that consist of two or more supports and a crosspiece. Examples cited by the *OED* are an iron support for a pot hanging over a kitchen fire (an example from 1512); a frame that supports the end of the boom on a sailing ship (an example from 1769); and a wooden frame from which are suspended the carcasses of slaughtered sheep or cattle (examples from 1866 and 1890, respectively). *OED*, s.v. ‘gallows’, sense 5.

¹⁷ The *DOE*, s.v. *æpelu*, sense 1.

precedes an enumeration of the four varieties of hardwood from which the item is made, I translate *þæs bēames* [. . .] *æpelu* as ‘the fine elements of that wooden object’.

A third textual difficulty regards the four varieties of wood that are enumerated in lines 9–10. While three of these names present no difficulty (these are *āc* ‘oak’, *īw* ‘yew’, and *holen* ‘holly’), the fourth one does, for *hlin* (9a) is not otherwise attested as a name for a type of tree or wood. Bosworth and Toller speculate that *hlyn* (or *hlin*) means ‘maple’ on the basis of the Old Icelandic noun *hlynr* ‘maple’, but that word too is rare.¹⁸ Thorpe wondered if *hlin* was an error for *blind*, i.e. *lind* ‘linden wood’, a wood that was favoured by shield-makers on account of its strength and light weight.¹⁹ Despite the attractiveness of such an emendation, I think it prudent to keep to the manuscript reading *hlin*, understood (in an educated guess) as ‘maple’.

A fourth problem — one that is perhaps the expression of a riddler’s deliberate attempt to deceive — is that in verse 12b, the neuter noun *wāpen* is grammatically ambiguous and can be taken as either singular or plural. Although I translate that word in the plural in the understanding that more than one type of weaponry is meant, it could be taken to refer only to the sword, either by itself or with its scabbard. In either event, the phrase *wunden gold* (3b) is a transparent reference to gold ornamentation on a sword, while *seolfres dæl* (4b), similarly, could refer to silver ornamentation on the hilt of a sword or, alternatively, on the mouthpiece or chape of a scabbard.²⁰ It is plausible to think that while weaponry in the plural is referred to in lines 12b–14a, the sword (together with its ornamented scabbard) is singled out for attention as a spectacular individual treasure (*maðm*).

To conclude this catalog of minor textual problems, the verbal form *ābæd* (12b) has inspired a wide range of interpretations. The verb *ā-biddan*, which has the past singular form *ā-bæd*, can mean not only ‘to ask for’ but also ‘to obtain by asking’ or simply ‘to obtain’, and I follow the *Dictionary of Old English* in taking the word in that sense here.²¹ An alternative possibility is that *ābæd* stands

¹⁸ B-T, s.v. *hlyn*; Cleasby and Vigfusson, s.v. *hlynr*.

¹⁹ *Codex Exoniensis*, ed. by Benjamin Thorpe (London, 1842), note *ad loc*.

²⁰ H. R. Ellis Davidson, *The Sword in Anglo-Saxon England* (Oxford, 1962), discusses the gold and silver ornamentation of sword hilts on pp. 58–71, 177–78, and elsewhere.

²¹ The *DOE*, s.v. *ā-biddan*, sense B: ‘to obtain by asking’. The *DOE* entry for the word as used in Riddle 55 (entry B.I.e) includes a precise summary of the terms of this debate. ‘If *ābæd* is a form of *abiddan*, then perhaps understand in sense “obtained” or “received”: “that (thing)

for *ābēad* ‘offered’.²² The object whose name is to be guessed then often ‘offered weapons to’ its liege lord rather than obtaining weapons from him. The choice of options here does not seem to me a crucial one.

Prior Solutions

Many solutions to Riddle 55 have been proposed, and before I put forth my own, this critical literature should be surveyed in brief.

Richard Jordan and Felix Liebermann were the first two modern scholars to offer a plausible solution for Riddle 55,²³ and their way of reading the poem remains, for the most part, the most convincing that has yet been offered. Jordan, writing in 1903, saw the name *wulfhēafod-trēow* ‘gallows, cross’ as a key to the solution and asked, ‘War vielleicht ein reich verziertes, einem Kreuz oder Galgen ähnliches Gestell gemeint, an dem Waffen aufgehängt wurden wie Verbrecher am Galgen?’²⁴ Jordan’s speculation is justified in the main. His conclusion that the gallows or rack in question is richly decorated (*reich verziertes*), however,

often obtained/received a weapon for its lord”, where among solutions proposed (at least for this part of the riddle) are shield, scabbard, sword-rack and ornamented box for a sword; other suggestions include: *abad* for *abædeþ* or *abædde*, where *ābādan* (q.v.) is given an otherwise unrecorded sense “to repel or restrain; to ward off” and the solution proposed is the Cross; *abæd* as dialectal variation of or scribal error for *abead* “proffered” (from *abēodan*), where the solution proposed is a case for swords; and *abad* for *abad* “awaited”.

²² Krapp and Dobbie, p. 350.

²³ I view as implausible the two solutions offered by Franz Dietrich, ‘shield’ and ‘scabbard’, for neither answer can be related coherently to the motif of the ‘wolf’s-head tree’. See his two studies ‘Die Rätsel des Exeterbuchs: Würdigung, Lösung, und Herstellung’, *ZfdA*, 11 (1859), 448–90 (at p. 476), and ‘Die Rätsel des Exeterbuchs: Verfasser; weitere Lösungen’, *ZfdA*, 12 (1865), 232–52 (at p. 237). Dietrich’s ‘scabbard’ solution has been accepted, all the same, by A. J. Wyatt, ed., *Old English Riddles* (Boston, 1912), p. 106, as well as by W. S. Mackie in his edition of *The Exeter Book*, pt. 2, EETS OS, 194 (Oxford, 1934). Also improbable is Moritz Trautmann’s solution ‘harp’, as advanced in his article ‘Die Auflösungen der altenglischen Rätsel’, *Beiblatt zur Anglia*, 5 (1894), 46–51 (at p. 50) and his edition *Die altenglischen Rätsel* (Heidelberg, 1915), pp. 112–15. ‘Harp’ does not seem to have won any adherents, probably because that solution cannot account well for the sign of the cross, the weapons, and the gallows. Still, Trautmann succeeds in connecting the shape of one kind of harp that is illustrated in Anglo-Saxon manuscripts to one possible shape of the gallows.

²⁴ Richard Jordan, *Die altenglischen Säuiergenamen* (Heidelberg, 1903), p. 62. ‘Was perhaps a rack or frame intended, one that was richly decorated and similar to a cross or gallows, on which weapons were hung, like criminals on a gallows?’

seems to be based on an inexact understanding of the adjective *wrætlic* (3a). What *wrætlic* properly means is not ‘richly decorated’, but rather ‘wondrous, curious’ or ‘of wondrous excellence, beautiful, noble, excellent, elegant’.²⁵ The object would seem to be a fine thing, then, without necessarily being carved in a decorative manner. Liebermann, in 1905, independently argued for the solution ‘gallows’ or ‘sword rack’, adding the ingenious suggestion that, when arranged in the right order, the initial letters of the four types of wood that are enumerated in lines 9–10a — **L** (for *hlin*), **A** (for *āc*), **I** (for *īw*), and **H** (for *holen*) — spell out a nonce-word **ialh*, which through phonological wordplay is meant to suggest the common noun *gealg* or *gealh*, meaning ‘gallows’. The ‘gallows’ of the poem, in turn, he took as a metaphor for some kind of sword rack.²⁶ Without commenting on this brilliant but contrived argument involving acrostics, Ferdinand Holthausen in 1919 put his scholarly weight behind the gist of Jordan’s and Liebermann’s suggestions: ‘Daß ein waffenständer in form eines kreuzes gemeint ist, scheint mir sicher.’²⁷ Similarly, Krapp and Dobbie writing in 1936 accepted the solution ‘sword-rack [. . .] pictured in the form of a cross [. . .] and of a gallows’, mentioning specifically that ‘to the Anglo-Saxon mind the cross and the gallows appear to have been similar in form’.²⁸ This claim about the similar shape of the cross and the gallows needs to be inspected more closely, as we shall see.

Alternative solutions to Riddle 55 that have nothing to do with gallows or sword racks have been proposed. Frederick Tupper’s solution ‘cross’ satisfies some of the conditions posed by the riddler but not all. In particular, one wonders why the poet emphasizes weaponry if ‘cross’ is the solution. Tupper attempted to forestall that objection by ascribing a sense to the verb *ābæd* that is otherwise unattested, so that his cross ‘wards off’ weapons, though with some linguistic strain.²⁹ A weightier objection to Tupper’s solution, however, is that

²⁵ Bosworth and Toller, s.v. *wræt-lic*, senses I and II, respectively.

²⁶ F. Liebermann, ‘Das Angelsächsische Rätsel 56: “Galgen” als Waffenständer’, *Archiv für das Studium der neueren Sprachen und Literaturen*, 114 (1905), 163–64. The weak links in this argument have stood in the way of its general acceptance. The first wood named is *hlin*, for example, not **lin[d]*, while except in one instance in a compound, the OE noun in question is a two-syllable word (*galga* or *gealga*), not a monosyllabic one (*gealg* or *gealh*). Liebermann’s suggestion should not be ruled out, however, for wordplay often involves linguistic distortion.

²⁷ F. Holthausen, ‘Zu den altenglischen Rätseln’, *Beiblatt zur Anglia*, 30 (1919), 50–55 (p. 53). ‘That a weapon-stand in the form of a cross is intended seems to me certain.’

²⁸ Krapp and Dobbie, p. 350.

²⁹ Tupper, pp. 188–92 (at p. 189). Tupper’s suggestion, though not endorsed by the *DOE* (see note 21 above), is accepted by Pinsker and Ziegler, *Die altenglische Rätsel*, pp. 275–76, as

it would be too much of a give-away. Whatever object is alluded to by the phrase *rōde tǣcn* (5a), it ought to look or function *like* a cross without actually being one.³⁰ The fact that the True Cross was traditionally said to be made of four types of wood would seem to count in favour of Tupper's argument but fails to do so, for the four woods of the Cross are traditionally identified as almost anything but the four species that are named in verses 9–10a.³¹

A second alternative solution, Craig Williamson's 'ornamented sword box' (which he offers only tentatively), cannot account for the gallows metaphor and for that reason is less than ideal, as he freely grants.³² Still, a sword box of some kind could be part of the answer if the object consists of several items joined together, as is suggested by the presence of four different varieties of wood.

The most recent solution to be proposed, Keith Taylor's 'mead-barrel and drinking bowl', departs boldly from previous suggestions. Although forcefully argued, this solution is likely to win few adherents because of the obvious difference between a bowl or barrel and a gallows. Taylor's ingenious claim that the noun *wulfhēafod-trēow* can be interpreted as 'a metaphoric reference to a mead-barrel and drinking bowl' because mead is 'notorious [. . .] for turning law-abiding citizens into criminals of the worst sort'³³ is unlikely to win assent, for

is noted above. Editing and translating verses 12b–13a in accord with this interpretation, those editors take those verses to mean 'Oft erbot sich dieser als Waffe seinem Herrn' (Often the object offered itself to its Lord as a weapon), taking the 'weapon' to be the cross as a weapon of Christ. What the Old English verses say more exactly, though, is that the object either offered weapons (plural, or 'a weapon' singular if one prefers) to its lord or received weapons from him. Pinsker and Ziegler also emend verse 5a from *ond rōde tǣcn* 'and the symbol of the cross' to *on rōde tǣcn*; the gold and silver of lines 3–4 are thus to be thought of 'in die Gestalt des Kreuzes' (in the form of a cross). These editors thus enhance the appeal of their solution through rewriting the text. E. G. Stanley, 'Heroic Aspects of the Exeter Book Riddles', in *Prosody and Poetics in the Early Middle Ages*, ed. by M. J. Toswell (Toronto, 1995), pp. 197–218 (at pp. 209–10), reads Riddle 55, without explanation, as 'a poem of the Holy Eucharist' and interprets its initial setting as 'what looks like a carousing scene in hall, but may be a scene of divine worship'. His wooden object thus is seen 'warding off' attack in what he sees as an anti-heroic moment.

³⁰ As Trautmann remarked, *Die altenglischen Rätsel*, p. 112, 'das Stück wäre gar kein Rätsel, wenn darin die Auflösung (*rōde tǣcn*, v. 5) gegeben wäre' (the text would scarcely be a riddle if it gave away its solution ('the sign of the cross', line 5)).

³¹ For example, in one medieval account they are cedar, cypress, palm, and olive, while in another they are cedar, cypress, pine, and box. See Tupper, p. 190, n. on lines 9–10.

³² Williamson, p. 303.

³³ Taylor, 'Mazers, Mead, and the Wolf's-head Tree', p. 508.

Anglo-Saxon authors frequently associate mead with conviviality rather than criminality. Within the heroic world of *Beowulf*, for example, drinking is presented within a larger system of values which has its own integrity and is presented with some sympathy, even though it may ultimately be rejected by the Christian reader. Within that system, as Hugh Magennis has pointed out, excessive drinking may be regarded as ‘a danger to be guarded against’, and yet drinking in moderation is ‘also, and more centrally, a symbol of social cohesion’.³⁴ Compounding this problem of the *wulfhēafod-trēow* is the question of why the riddler emphasizes weaponry. One wonders how Taylor’s mead-barrel or drinking bowl would either receive or offer a sword or other weapons.³⁵

All the same, Taylor neatly disposes of one false assumption that has haunted the critical literature about this poem. That is the notion that the phrase *rōde tācn* refers to the wooden object itself, which must therefore be shaped like a cross. On the contrary, that phrase could refer to the gold-adorned sword that is mentioned somewhat later.³⁶ The tang and guard of a sword naturally lend its hilt the appearance of a cross. Traditionally, the hilt thus served as a ready symbol (*tācn*) of the cross. A fine Anglo-Saxon golden-hilted sword, in particular, might easily recall a fine cross ornamented in gold. Despite frequent statements in the critical literature to the effect that the large wooden object of Riddle 55 has the shape of a cross, the object whose identity is to be discovered therefore need

³⁴ Hugh Magennis, ‘The *Beowulf* Poet and his *Druncne Dryhtguman*’, *NM*, 86 (1985), 159–64 (p. 164). See further Magennis’s complex and subtle discussion of the spectrum of Anglo-Saxon attitudes toward drinking in his book *Images of Community in Old English Poetry* (Cambridge, 1996), esp. ch. 2: ‘Hall and City, Feasting and Drinking: Images of Communal Life’ (pp. 35–59), and his more wide-ranging treatment of that topic in *Anglo-Saxon Appetites: Food and Drink and their Consumption in Old English and Related Literature* (Dublin, 1999), with remarks on ‘The central place of drinking in Germanic feasts’ on pp. 21–28. In a later chapter (at pp. 116–17 below), I will have occasion to emphasize the negative attitude toward excessive drinking that was characteristic of early medieval Christian culture. Disapproval of drunkenness is still to be distinguished from condemnation of criminal action deserving of the gallows.

³⁵ In keeping with his approach to the ‘gallows’ problem, Taylor, ‘Mazers, Mead, and Wolfs-head Tree’, p. 510, recommends emending *abæd* to *abædeð*, apparently wanting to translate 12b–13a as ‘that often restrains a weapon from its lord’ or ‘that often restrains a lord from [using] weapons’, with allusion to the intoxicating powers of drink. Such a construction seems forced when compared with the alternative one favoured by the *DOE* (see p. 66 and note 21 above).

³⁶ Taylor, ‘Mazers, Mead, and Wolfs-head Tree’, p. 501.

not be cross-like or *t*-like in form. In a manner that is yet to be determined, however, it must resemble a *wulfhēafod-trēow* 'gallows'.

Whether or not one accepts that the sword of 14a is the *rōde tācn* of 5a, Krapp and Dobbie's statement that 'to the Anglo-Saxon mind, the cross and the gallows appear to have been similar in form' deserves scrutiny. 'Similar in function' would be a more accurate claim. A glance at manuscript illustration of the later Anglo-Saxon period will confirm the validity of that distinction.

Depicted on the right-hand side of an illustration included on fol. 59^r of the Anglo-Saxon illustrated Hexateuch (London, British Library, Cotton MSS, Claudius B IV) is a simple gallows (Fig. 1).³⁷ Although what is illustrated here is an incident taken from Old Testament history, the artist has represented his theme through imagery that appears to be drawn from his contemporary world. To judge from this image, the Anglo-Saxons did not think of the gallows as shaped like a *t* or cross. The structure that is depicted here is built of two upright posts and a crossbeam. The Anglo-Saxon gallows had the same *function* as the cross that figures in accounts of the crucified Lord or martyred saints, however, and that was to hang putative criminals. The common OE noun that denotes the gallows, *galga* (or *gealga*), therefore, has either of two meanings.³⁸ When used to refer to the hanging of a criminal, it has the literal meaning 'gallows' or 'gibbet',³⁹ and it refers to a structure like that depicted in Figure 1. By extension, since both the gallows and the cross were used to hang miscreants, the word *galga* is frequently used of the cross, for which the more precise name was *rōd* or

³⁷ A facsimile edition is available: *The Old English Illustrated Hexateuch*, ed. by C. R. Dodwell and Peter Clemoes (Copenhagen, 1974).

³⁸ Bosworth and Toller, s.v. *galga*; *galga-trē*; *galg-trēow*. This dictionary's lack of a distinction between the two senses of the word is not helpful. The name *galga* is attested with various alternative spellings in Old Frisian, Old Saxon, Old High German, Gothic, and Old Norse as well as in OE and was the common Germanic word for 'gallows, gibbet'. After the Conversion, the word also came to be used of the cross, thus supplementing the word *rōd*, which in normal OE usage refers only to Christ's cross or a similar crucifix (see B-T, s.v. *rōd*, sense III). Latin *crux* was not borrowed into English as a common noun until after the Norman Conquest, when it came into the language via Old French *croiz*, *crois*, *croix*, though in the north and east of England *cross* was introduced at an early date via Old Norse *kross*, adopted from Old Irish *cross*. See the *OED*, s.v. *cross*, sb.

³⁹ An example of this usage is found in the latter part of *Beowulf* in those lines that evoke the grief of an old man who sees his son hanging *giong on galgan* 'young on the gallows' (2446a).



Figure 1. Hanged man, showing a rudimentary gallows.
London, British Library, Cotton MSS, Claudius B IV, fol. 59^r (detail).

rōde-trēow ‘rood-tree’. The gallows (or, speaking metaphorically, the *wulfhēafod-trēow*) therefore resembled the cross closely in function, but only slightly in form.

A Precise Solution Proposed

Keeping these last points in mind, it will be helpful now to proceed step by step through the text of Riddle 55 so as to see how its author points the way toward a solution, half-revealing and half-concealing the answer through a screen of metaphorical diction. The likelihood should be kept in mind that the right answer will be not just an *object* that was known to the Anglo-Saxons, but rather a *word* that denoted that object. Riddling is a word game, after all, and a riddle normally has a linguistic answer, not a physical one.

To begin with, the setting of Riddle 55 is the familiar aristocratic one of a hall (*heall*) with its liege-lord (*mon-dryhten*) and its floor or benches where heroes are seated at their cups (*þær haledð druncon*). The item that is put on prominent display in this imagined milieu is a large wooden one that is associated with some weaponry (*wāpen*) including at least one sword (*swēord*) decorated in gold. Since the object to be identified is said to be made of four different types of wood, it is a relatively complex one that is likely to be the product of a joiner’s skills. Its metaphorical name, *wulfhēafod-trēow*, ensures that we would not be wholly misguided if we were to propose *galga* (or *gealga*), denoting ‘gallows’, as the solution. On the other hand, *galga* itself cannot be the answer, as has been noted. Something else must be meant, as Jordan and Liebermann perceived: something that is gallows-like and that also either holds or contains weapons.

While no exact object of this kind is known from literature or archaeology, I believe that the manuscript illustration referred to above provides the seeds of a solution (again see Fig. 1). In this illustration of Genesis 40. 22, Pharaoh has freed his butler from prison, but he has sentenced his chief baker to be hanged: ‘þone oþerne he het hon on gealgan’ (he commanded the other man [the baker] to be hanged on a gallows).⁴⁰ What the artist depicts here, as we have seen, is a simple tripartite gallows consisting of two forked upright posts plus a crossbeam into which a peg has been driven so as to secure the rope from which the man is hung. Each post is furnished with steps so as to serve as a ladder. One name that the Anglo-Saxons had for such a structure was *hengen* ‘henge’ or ‘rack’. This word merits attention, for I believe it is very close to the riddle’s solution.

⁴⁰ *The Old English Version of the Heptateuch*, ed. by S. J. Crawford, EETS OS, 160 (Oxford, 1922; repr. 1997), p. 181.

When used to refer to a gallows, the noun *hengen* is roughly synonymous with *galga* or *galg-trēow*, but the word can mean something slightly different from those other terms, as well. In the main volume of Bosworth and Toller, three definitions are given for *hengen*. These are (I) ‘hanging’, as in the phrase ‘torture with hanging’; (II) ‘that on which any one is hung, a gibbet, gallows, cross’; and (III) ‘prison, confinement, durance’. In his *Supplement*, Toller offers an important modification of the second of these senses: ‘Under II, substitute: “an apparatus for punishment or torture to which the sufferer is attached”.’ As Toller makes clear, an apparatus of this kind had any of a number of forms, including that of a rack; that is, a framework on which a person’s limbs are held or stretched.⁴¹ The distinction made here is a significant one, for a *hengen* that served as a rack did not necessarily have the shape of a gallows or cross, though structurally it must have resembled a gallows or cross in having upright posts and at least one cross-beam.

An examination of the Old English textual records confirms that the word *hengen* in sense II has a fairly wide semantic range extending from ‘cross’ to ‘gallows’ to ‘rack’. Christ was hung on a *hengen* ‘cross’, as Ælfric remarks in his second sermon for Palm Sunday: ‘Pæt iudeisce folc nolde on crist gelyfan, ðone ðe hi mid hospe on hengene fæstnodon’⁴² (the Jews would not believe in Christ, whom they scornfully hung on a *hengen*). In this sense, the word is synonymous with *rōde-hengen*, which always denotes ‘cross’, ‘rood’, or ‘crucifixion’. On the other hand, when Ælfric employs the same word *hengen* in his account of the Emperor Dacianus’s persecution of St Vincent, he uses it to denote the rack: “Ahoð hine on þære hengene, and hetelice astreccað ealle his lima, pæt þa liþa him togaan!” (‘Hang him on the *hengen*, and cruelly stretch out all his limbs so that his joints are sundered!’). After St Vincent has been tortured on the *hengen*, he is then removed from that structure so as to be hung on a *gealga*, which must therefore be a structure of a different kind: ‘Dacianus þa het hine gedon of þære hengene, and hine eft ahon on heardum gealgan sona’⁴³ (Dacianus then commanded that he be taken off the rack and be hung up again straightway on a

⁴¹ Compare the OE compound noun *hengen-witnung*, a word that literally denotes ‘punishment on a *hengen*’ but that in attested use (as cited by B-T) has the less embodied sense ‘the punishment of imprisonment’.

⁴² *Ælfric’s Catholic Homilies, The Second Series: Text*, ed. by Malcolm Godden, EETS SS, 5 (Oxford, 1979), p. 146, lines 260–61 (my punctuation).

⁴³ *Old English Homilies from MS Bodley 343*, ed. by Susan Irvine, EETS, 302 (Oxford, 1993), pp. 99–115 (quotations from p. 103, lines 99–100, and p. 106, lines 157–58, my punctuation).

sturdy gallows). In its basic material sense, what *hengen* denotes is a structure consisting of at least one upright post and at least one crossbeam.⁴⁴

A solution to Riddle 55 can now be proposed. The solution can scarcely be anything other than an Old English word that denoted 'a wooden structure used to hang and/or store weapons'. In particular, the solution to Riddle 55 ought to be a word denoting a wooden frame suitable for hanging byrnie, as well as for holding swords and other weapons and armour. After all, it is the presence of one or more pendant byrnie, with forms that mirror the human torso, that enables the poet to indulge in a bit of grotesque humour. Although no Anglo-Saxon byrnie have survived intact, an Iron Age byrnie in a fine state of preservation was recovered from a bog at Vimose, Denmark, and can be seen at the National Museum in Copenhagen (Fig. 2).⁴⁵ It consists of more than twenty thousand iron rings individually riveted together. It is 'tailored' to fit relatively comfortably over the torso of a man despite its substantial weight, and when fitted on either a human torso or a suitable frame it maintains the shape of a man's upper body. In Riddle 55, in an image that is meant to recall the image of a man hung from a gallows, a byrnie is hung from a frame of some kind, and so that latter structure is metaphorically called a *wulfhēafod-trēow*.

The linguistically precise answer that I propose for Riddle 55 is **wāpen-hengen*. Although unattested in the extant records of Old English (much as *wulfhēafod-trēow* is unattested elsewhere), this compound noun is made up of two commonplace elements which, when put together, have the transparent meaning 'weapon-henge' or 'weapon-rack'. Looking at its second simplex, this compound recalls *rōde-hengen*. Looking at its first, it resembles *wāpen-hūs*, a compound word that is used as an OE gloss for Latin *armamentarium* and that is paralleled in Old High German *wāfan-hūs* and Middle Low German *wāpen-hūs*.⁴⁶ While

⁴⁴ This is the sort of structure that is denoted by the proper noun *Stonehenge*, according to an etymology of that word that was advanced in the seventeenth century and that does not, in fact, seem implausible. In his 1610 translation of William Camden's *Britannia siue flosentissimorum regnorum*, P. Holland refers to 'certaine mighty and unwrought stones [. . .] upon the heads of which, others like ouerthwart peeces do beare and rest crossewise [. . .] so as the whole frame seemeth to hang: whereof we call it Stonehenge' (*OED*, s.v. 'Stonehenge'). According to the *OED*, the proper noun 'Stonehenge' (in several spellings) is first attested in the writings of the twelfth-century chroniclers Henry of Huntingdon, Geoffrey of Monmouth, and Robert of Gloucester, all three of whom refer to that famous site by this name. I use the word 'henge', accordingly, as a modern English equivalent of the OE noun *hengen*.

⁴⁵ Jørgen Jensen, *Prehistory of Denmark* (Copenhagen, 1998), p. 93.

⁴⁶ Bosworth and Toller, s.v. *wāpen-hūs*; cf. also Charles T. Carr, *Nominal Compounds in Germanic* (London, 1939), p. 135.



Figure 2. Byrnie from Vimose bog, Denmark.
The National Museum, Copenhagen.

the word *wāpen-hūs* itself could be offered as a possible solution to the riddle, my diffidence in regard to that possibility relates to my lack of conviction that an *armamentarium* was a mobile upright structure of the sort that could be brought into a hall.

If for some reason the answer **wāpen-hengen* is found unacceptable, then there are several alternative possibilities that are worth considering. One of these is another unattested word, **wāpen-trēow*, taking that word to mean ‘weapon-tree’ or ‘wooden frame used to hang weapons’. On the one hand this word resembles such compounds as *wearg-trēow* and *galg-trēow*, while on the other it recalls *wāpen-hūs* and many other *wāpen-* compounds. Another possible answer is worth contemplating as well. If one supposes that the frame structure on which weapons are hung is equipped with wheels, then the answer might be *fyrð-wān* ‘military transport vehicle’.⁴⁷ This word is constructed like such other OE *-wān* or *-wāgn* compounds as *hors-wāgn*, *scrid-wāgn*, and *wīg-wāgn*, three words that denote some kind of cart or chariot. What *fyrð-wān* denotes is a vehicle that could be used to transport weapons. One can only guess just what an Anglo-Saxon *fyrð-wān* looked like, and such things may have differed in appearance depending on whether they were being put to immediate military use or not. The fact that there is an OE simplex noun *scrid* that denotes a wide variety of vehicles from ‘carriage’ or ‘chariot’ (with wheels) to ‘litter’ (without wheels) suggests that little is to be gained by trying to make fine distinctions here. The solution *fyrð-wān* will only prove tempting if one assumes that an Anglo-Saxon cart or waggon that was capable of carrying war-gear would have been framed more or less like a *hengen*, with upright beams and one or more cross-beams from which heavy items could be hung. Presumably, such a cart would have resembled a gallows closely enough for a riddler to give it the metaphorical name *wulfhēafod-trēow*. The main objection to this solution is that the riddler makes no allusion to wheels. While the object in question is mobile (note *on flet beran*, 2a), there is no indication that it is rolled.

In the absence of a flesh-and-blood riddler to confirm the ‘right’ answer to Riddle 55, the word or words that constitute that solution must remain speculative. Still the object itself must have existed. Members of the Anglo-Saxon

⁴⁷ Etymologically the noun *fyrð-wān* is compounded of the two common nouns *fyrð* ‘army, militia’ and *wān* or *wāgn* ‘waggon, carriage’. Bosworth and Toller define *fyrð-wāgn* as ‘a military waggon’. The *DOE* defines *fyrð-wān* as ‘carriage (for a journey)’, deriving that meaning from the only two recorded instances of the word, neither of which relates to military equipment or use. Evidently the original sense of the word became generalized over time.

warrior aristocracy must have owned such structures, and these things must have had names. The warriors of that time prized their weapons, and they would have had means of storing them, displaying them, and moving them about safely and efficiently. While items of moderate size, such as swords, could have been stored in a box (OE *earce* ‘box’ or *cist* ‘chest’), long objects like spears and bulky ones like helmets, shields, and byrnie are more likely to have been stored on some kind of frame. A byrnie, in particular, would have fallen into a jumbled heap if it had not been hung from a sturdy rack.

As far as I am aware, no artists of the Anglo-Saxon period depicted a rack or cart of this kind. One part of the Bayeux tapestry (which dates from shortly after the Conquest), however, shows a scene that has a bearing on the question of how carts were used to carry heavy weapons and armour. This scene, the central part of which is reproduced as Figure 3, depicts arms and provisions being transported to the coast of Normandy so as to be taken aboard Duke William’s ships, which are being prepared for embarkation.⁴⁸ The subject of this scene is identified in an accompanying inscription: *ISTI PORTANT ARMAS AD NAVES, ET HIC TRAHUNT CARRUM CUM VINO ET ARMIS* (‘These men here are carrying weapons to the ships, and here they are pulling a cart laden with wine and weapons’). The small procession is headed by a group of three men, two of whom are in harness so as to pull a four-wheeled cart — an item that speakers of the English of this period would probably have called a *fyrð-wæn* if asked. Although the main item carried on the cart is a huge wine cask, the cart also bears an assortment of weapons. Clearly visible are the upper parts of twenty spears with barbed heads. Five helmets, in addition, are secured to the tops of five upright poles. Since the artist who is responsible for this part of the tapestry was scarcely a master of perspective, what he doubtless meant to depict was a cart holding forty spears and ten helmets, for only one side of the cart is depicted (just as only two of the four cartwheels are shown).

Nine porters carrying various weapons are represented following the cart (though only the first three men are shown in Fig. 3). They carry four byrnie on poles. Concerning this prized item of the warrior’s full complement of arms,

⁴⁸ David M. Wilson, *The Bayeux Tapestry: The Complete Tapestry in Color, with Introduction, Description, and Commentary* (New York, 1985), plates 37 (right side), 38, and 39 (left side); Martin K. Foy offers commentary on the same scene (labeled panels 88 and 89) in his CD-ROM edition *The Bayeux Tapestry Digital Edition* (Leicester, 2003). J. Bard McNulty gives a clear and succinct overview of the Bayeux tapestry in his article on that topic in *Medieval England*, pp. 109–11.



Figure 3. Procession with cart and weapons. Detail from the Bayeux Tapestry, eleventh century. By special permission of the City of Bayeux.

David M. Wilson writes, ‘The mail-shirt is the most impressive piece of armour pictured in the Tapestry: obviously heavy and valuable, it is seen carried between two men on a pole’.⁴⁹ The porter who is first in line behind the cart bears the pole on his left shoulder, using his right hand to help support its weight, while with his left hand he holds a spear and a helmet, which he grasps by the nasal. A sword and a helmet are attached to the same pole. In the background, another porter is shown carrying a battle-axe, and slung over his shoulder is a large object that has been thought to be a slaughtered pig,⁵⁰ though a wine skin is more likely.

This complicated scene can be summed up as follows. The whole amount of weaponry pulled or carried by these porters (allowing that the numbers of some items should be doubled) appears to come to forty-three spears, sixteen helmets, nine swords, four byrnie, and an axe. Of course, these absolute numbers are

⁴⁹ Wilson, *Bayeux Tapestry*, p. 220, col. 2.

⁵⁰ Wilson, *Bayeux Tapestry*, p. 185, col. 1.

meaningless. The weapons depicted in this part of the tapestry are meant to be suggestive, proportionately, of the whole complement of arms that is being borne down to the sea. Still, it is worth noting that if the wine cask were removed from the cart, room would be available for almost all the weapons depicted in the procession. The byrnies, still on their poles, could be suspended transversely from the two beams that, apparently, extend lengthwise down each side of the cart.

When the poet of Riddle 55 says, then, that he saw a wooden object of this general type 'being borne into the hall', one has to imagine at least two strong men involved in this effort. Of course, if such a structure were mounted on wheels (as in the scene from the tapestry), then the going would be easier.

Conclusion: An Early Instance of Gallows Humour

The seemingly bizarre object that the speaker of Riddle 55 claims to have seen in the hall, then, is nothing more exotic than a **wāpen-hengen* or **wāpen-trēow* (or, conceivably, a *fyrð-wān*) that is hung with at least one byrnie so that it resembles a gallows. Among the other weapons mounted on the frame is at least one sword adorned with gold on its hilt. There is some silver decoration, as well. While this detail is likely to refer to a scabbard with silver chasings, the reference might be to additional decoration on the sword, or to some other item of weaponry. The cross-like hilt of the sword provides the sign of the cross upon which the poet elaborates. As for the material out of which the main wooden object is composed, one can only speculate why the four woods that are specified in lines 9–10a are named. An Anglo-Saxon joiner might find this an easy question to answer, but today we can only guess. Seasoned oak is the obvious wood of choice for the main timbers of a structure that is designed to bear some weight. Yew has impressive tensile strength and for that reason, I imagine, would have been the wood of choice for those parts of the structure that required both strength and pliability. What role the maple (if it is maple) and holly might have in this structure is difficult to say, though these too are hardwoods with a variety of potential uses. If one takes into account the beams, planks, poles, dowels, and other accessories that might be features of a complex weapon rack, then a combination of woods having various qualities would be called for. Moreover, if the structure is imagined to have wheels, with their spokes, ferrules, axles, and supporting blocks, then the need for a variety of particular woods is obvious. Of course, it is also possible that the four woods named in lines 9–10a pertain to the weapons carried on such a structure. In this event the oak could be the wood of a

scabbard, the maple could form the main part of a shield,⁵¹ and the yew could be the wood of a bow, among other possibilities.

Two remaining details fit in well with my proposed solution and, I believe, will help to confirm its validity.

First, in lines 5–7a, the object whose name is to be guessed is associated with the cross of Christ, who ‘raised up a ladder to heaven for us’ before harrowing hell. A hint as to the answer to Riddle 55 may possibly be embedded in this phrasing, for the two upright posts of a *galga* of the kind that is depicted in Figure 1 are literally ladders. The steps of each ladder stand out clearly in this artist’s representation. This play on Christian iconography, if one wishes to see it as such, is rather sharp in its implications and yet consistent with orthodox doctrine. Just as the *galga* in the sense of *rōd* ‘cross’ is a metaphorical ladder by which martyrs mount to heaven, the *galga* (or *hengen*) in its ordinary sense of ‘gallows’ is a ladder that sends malefactors to hell.

Second, it is surely not by accident that Riddle 55 directly precedes Riddle 56 in the layout of the Exeter Book. This latter riddle begins, ‘Ic wæs þær inne þær ic ane geseah / winnende wiht wido [= wudu] bennegean’ (I was inside there when I saw a labouring creature injuring a wooden object). The solution to this riddle is a loom, together with the tapestry that it produces. The loom, too, is tree-like, for part of it is called a *trēow* ‘beam’ (9a) — an apparent allusion to the cross-beam that forms its top. The tapestry is seen being carried out onto the floor (*on flet beran*, 12b) where men are having a drink (*þær hāleð druncon*, 11b). The fact that these phrases are identical to verses 2a and 1b of Riddle 55, respectively, cannot be coincidental and is likely to be the result of direct borrowing, if it is not the ‘signature’ of a single author. In any event, the compiler of this part of the Exeter Book seems to have conceived of these two riddles as a pair.

The juxtaposition of these two riddles is a felicitous one because a loom, too, is a type of *hengen*. The old European type of heavy domestic loom was made of two upright posts and a crossbeam from which the warp was hung. The structure of such a loom is evident from Figure 4, which depicts a modern example from Lyngen in northern Norway. When one takes into account the physical resemblance of a *hengen* that is used to hang or stretch criminals to a *hengen* that is used to support the weaving apparatus of a loom, then the fact that Ælfric

⁵¹ Jacqui Wilson, ‘Wood Usage in Anglo-Saxon Shields’, *ASSAH*, 7 (1994), 35–48, identifies the following woods as ones from which shields were made during the Anglo-Saxon period: ‘alder, ash, birch, lime, maple and willow or poplar; with one or two examples of beech and oak’ (p. 37).



Figure 4. Domestic loom from Lyngen, Norway. Haakon Schetelig and Hjalmar Falk, *Scandinavian Archaeology*, trans. by E. V. Gordon (Oxford, 1937), plate 55 (after p. 334).

conjoined these two images in one of his homilies should occasion no surprise. When telling of the martyrdom of the early Christian convert Quirinus, Ælfric describes how an enraged henchman of the Emperor Trajan orders Quirinus to be killed: ‘Ða het Aurelianus on hengenre afæstnien þone halgan wer and

aðenian his lima swa swa man webb tyht; ac he nan word ne gecwæð'⁵² (Then Aurelianus ordered that the holy man be fastened to a rack and that his limbs be stretched out just as a web is fastened to the loom; but he spoke not a word). The image of a man being stretched out on a rack thus naturally called to Ælfric's mind the image of a loom with its stretched fabric. Here, in a variation on the equivalency of body and byrnie that is a crucial part of the ludic strategy of Riddle 55, a human body is likened to a piece of woven cloth.

Moreover, three other riddles in this immediate part of the Exeter Book resemble Riddles 55 and 56 in that their answers are fairly substantial objects made out of wood. These are Riddle 52 (usually solved as 'flail'), Riddle 53 (often solved as 'battering ram'), and Riddle 54 ('churn' or 'churn and butter', with a double entendre on the sexual act). Recently Jonathan Wilcox has proposed that the solution to Riddle 53 is actually 'gallows' rather than 'battering ram'.⁵³ If his persuasive arguments are accepted, then Riddles 53, 55, and 56 all describe large wooden frames with one or more upright posts and a crossbeam. In any event, it is likely that Riddles 52 to 56 were grouped together in this part of the Exeter Book because of their similar solutions. As for the metal weapons that, together with the wooden *hengen*, make up the whole complex object that is described in Riddle 55, they are met with separately elsewhere in this collection as answers to Riddles 5 (the shield, with its metal boss), 20 (the sword), 35 (the byrnie), 71 (the sword, again), and 73 (the spear, with its metal head). So the solution that I have proposed for Riddle 55 is closely analogous to the 'loom' solution that is generally accepted for Riddle 56 and the 'gallows' solution that Wilcox plausibly proposes for Riddle 53. It fits well in the 'wooden object' group that consists of Riddles 52–56. Only in Riddle 55, though, is the category 'metal weaponry' (including the byrnie and the sword) united with the category 'wood, in its various kinds' in a single complex image.

To conclude this discussion of one of the most beguiling puzzles of the Exeter Book, Riddle 55 half hides and half reveals a structure that is likely to have been familiar to any member of the Anglo-Saxon warrior aristocracy. This was a weapon-rack or (possibly) a cart used to store and transport military equipment.

⁵² *Homilies of Ælfric: A Supplementary Collection*, ed. by John Collins Pope, 2 vols, EETS OS, 259–60 (Oxford, 1967–68), II, 745, here printed without regard to Pope's lineation. This homily treats the martyrdom of saints Alexander, Eventius, and Theodolus. The loom simile is Ælfric's addition to his source, which is the fourth and last chapter of the *Acta Alexandri*.

⁵³ Jonathan Wilcox, 'New Solutions to Old English Riddles: Riddles 17 and 53', *PQ*, 69 (1990), 393–408 (at pp. 398–403).

When hung with one or more byrnies, this structure bore a resemblance to a gallows, and yet it had the merciful quality of hanging only weapons, not men. Riddle 55 thus provides an early instance of ‘gallows humour’, for it flirts with a macabre theme and turns it into an object of wit.⁵⁴ Without being able to interview a person of the Anglo-Saxon era, one cannot be sure what the name of this rack (or cart) was, and so no linguistically exact answer to Riddle 55 can be advanced with confidence. Perhaps there was no single generally accepted name for such a thing. In any event, we may be in danger of spoiling the poet’s joke by worrying too much about nomenclature. While I offer **wāpen-hengen* as a plausible period-specific solution, I suspect that a person of the Anglo-Saxon period who posed Riddle 55 to a group of his countrymen would have been satisfied with the reply, ‘La, leof, beo hit hengen oþþe wægn gehladen mid byrnum ond sweordum?’ (Well, my friend, could it be a rack or waggon loaded up with byrnies and swords?).

⁵⁴ Capital punishment (typically in the form of hanging, apparently) seems to have been an institutional aspect of Anglo-Saxon life. I touch on this point in chapter 5 below, at p. 183, in connection with *The Wife’s Lament* and the term *wearg-trēow*.

NEW ANSWERS TO EXETER BOOK
RIDDLES 36, 58, 70, AND 75/76

The first of the two preceding chapters discusses a riddle of the Exeter Book for which I offer a new solution; the next proposes an answer that, while building on previous scholarship, fulfils the terms of that riddle more precisely than other proposed solutions have done. Here I will propose four other riddle solutions that are new either wholly or in part. These are Riddle 36, solved by some readers as ‘ship’ (though the answer is far more complex than that, as Moritz Trautmann perceived); Riddle 58, solved by general consent as ‘well sweep’ (though that is not the end of the matter); Riddle 70, solved by John Collins Pope as ‘lighthouse’ (prematurely, I think); and Riddle 75/76, solved by Craig Williamson as ‘piss’ (though that suggestion must regretfully be practically ruled out). Since none of my proposed solutions to these riddles requires lengthy justification, the four of them can be discussed as a group.

Riddle 36: Monster’s Ball

At first glance, Riddle 36 may appear to depend on cryptography for its solution, for embedded in its text is a string of highly enigmatic words and letters. What

This chapter and the one that follows it developed out of talks given at the University of California, Berkeley, and the University of Wisconsin, Madison, in spring and fall 2004, respectively, as well as a paper on ‘Answering the Riddles in their Own Tongue’ presented at the International Medieval Congress held at Kalamazoo, Michigan, in May 2005. I am grateful to the persons in attendance on those occasions for their stimulating questions and comments.

this line of text seems to represent, however, is not an integral part of the riddle but rather a gloss that at some point was incorporated into the poem through an error of transmission.¹ To all appearances, this cryptic line consists of no more than a disguised hint at the riddle's answer. It may offer some help to a would-be solver, but in no circumstances should it be allowed to impede the process of interpretation.

The text in its entirety reads as follows as edited by Muir. In presenting it, I depart from Muir in setting 'line 5' in boldface type so as to suggest with greater clarity that anyone who wishes to make sense of the riddle should read straight through from line 4 to line 6. One other noteworthy feature of the text is that it falls into two fairly distinct parts consisting of lines 1–7 and 8–13. Again, this fact should not be allowed to impede interpretation, for the riddle has but a single complex solution.

Ic wiht geseah on wege feran,
 seo wæs wrætlice wundrum gegierwed.
 Hæfde feowere fet under wombe
 ond ehtuwe ufon on hrycge;
 5 **<monn·h·w·M·wiif·m·x·l·kf wf·hors·qxxs·>**
 hæfde tu fipru ond twelf eagan
 ond siex heafdu. Saga hwæt hio wære.
 For flodwegas; ne wæs þæt na fugul ana,
 ac þær wæs æghwylces anra gelicnes
 10 horses ond monnes, hundes ond fugles,
 ond eac wifes wite. Þu wast, gif þu const
 to gesecganne, þæt we soð witan,
 hu þære wihte wise gonge.²

(I saw a creature — one that was cunningly fashioned and marvelously decked out — travelling down a path. It had four feet under its belly and eight upon its back; it had two wings and twelve eyes and six heads. Say what it was. — It travelled the sea paths; it was not only a bird, but present was the likeness of each of the following things: a horse and a human being, a dog and a bird, and there was also the countenance of a woman. If you understand speaking, you will know what we know in truth: what kind of creature this is.³)

¹ On this point (and for more detailed information concerning this somewhat garbled line), see Krapp and Dobbie, p. 341, as supplemented by Muir, II, 637, and Williamson, p. 249.

² Muir, I, 310–11, with a comma omitted at the end of line 11 and a capital 'H' adopted at the start of line 3. The spacing and pointing of 'line 5' have been corrected on the basis of an examination of the Exeter Book facsimile.

³ The last two and a half lines of Riddle 36 are difficult to construe. Williamson (p. 252) is probably correct in reading *tō gesecganne* as a gerund, the object of *const*, and in taking the

A. J. Wyatt was frank in expressing his opinion of Riddle 36: 'This is one of the riddles one wishes at the bottom of the Bay of Portugal.'⁴ Other scholars have been more charitable in their view of this small exercise in wit, but no one yet (in my opinion) has got the answer quite right.

Particularly since the 'creature' in question is said to travel on the sea and mention is made of a horse and a bird, some readers have followed a false lead in taking Riddle 36 to be a variation on the type of 'ship' riddle that is exemplified by Riddles 19 and 64, with their metaphorical horses and falcons.⁵ A more fruitful approach to Riddle 36, I believe, is to regard it as an example of a 'monster' riddle.⁶ The challenge facing the reader in this popular literary subgenre is to find a way to account for the bizarre number of body parts that pertain to the 'creature' that is being described.⁷ The best example in the Exeter Book collection of a 'monster' riddle is Riddle 86, with its curious creature having one eye, a back, a belly, two ears, two feet, two hands, arms, and shoulders, and twelve hundred heads. Only a very clever person (or a reader of Symphosius) is likely to guess the answer, 'one-eyed seller of garlic'.⁸ Aldhelm's Riddle 84 is another example. This text describes a creature with six heads and twelve eyes on a single

last line to mean 'what the nature of this creature is' rather than 'how the nature (*wise*) of this creature goes'.

⁴ *Old English Riddles*, ed. by A. J. Wyatt (Boston, 1912), p. 93.

⁵ Among those who have adopted this approach are Tupper, pp. 154–57; Williamson, pp. 248–52; and Muir, II, 660, to cite three examples.

⁶ Both Franz Eduard Dietrich, 'Die Räthsel des Exeterbuchs: Würdigung, Lösung und Herstellung', *ZfdA*, 11 (1859), 232–52, and Moritz Trautmann, in *Die altenglischen Rätsel* (Heidelberg, 1915), p. 78, take this approach to Riddle 36. See Williamson, p. 249, for a summary of their respective arguments, which he rejects in favour of the solution 'ship'.

⁷ Archer Taylor, *English Riddles from Oral Tradition* (Berkeley, CA, 1951), discusses various riddles of this type in his ch. 1: 'Comparisons to a Living Creature' (pp. 9–101), esp. at pp. 24–28. He notes that 'The fundamental conception of a creature having an abnormal number of members, usually heads and feet, is applicable to many uses in riddling' (p. 26).

⁸ Symphosius includes a very similar riddle, *Luscus alium vendens* 'one-eyed person selling garlic', as Riddle 94 in his collection. For discussion, see Williamson, pp. 376–77. Jonathan Wilcox, 'Mock-Riddles in Old English: Exeter Riddles 86 and 19', *SPh*, 93 (1996), 180–87 (pp. 180–85) notes that one playful element of the Old English 'garlic-seller' riddle is lost when its last line is emended (as is the usual editorial practice) from *Saga hwæt ic hatte* 'Say what I am called' to *Saga hwæt hīo hatte* 'Say what it is called'. In his view Riddle 86 is designed as a 'mock' riddle whose answer is the name of the person posing it, not the identity of the 'monster' that absorbs all one's attention.

body (or *in* a single body; the Latin preposition *in* is used here with ambiguous intent).⁹ The answer is not some weird kind of insect or some strange Indian deity, as a naive reader might infer, but rather ‘sow pregnant with five piglets’.

The cryptic words and letters that constitute the whole of ‘line 5’ of Riddle 36 go some distance towards giving away the identity of the ‘monster’, for easy to read there are the words *monn* ‘man’, *wiif* ‘woman’, and *hors* ‘horse’, written out side by side with some other letters that are difficult to construe in detail but that are clearly suggestive of the Latin synonyms *homo*, *mulier*, and *equus*, respectively.¹⁰ A good initial hypothesis, as Trautmann perceived, is that we are dealing with the idea of a man and a woman riding a horse.¹¹ Riddles of this type are known from later tradition. A riddle from an early nineteenth-century English collection, for example (Taylor number 54a) has as its solution ‘a man and a woman on horseback’.¹² This ‘creature’ has three bodies, eight legs, and three mouths, among other odd features that derive from the idiosyncratic provision that the woman is riding side-saddle while the man is not, so that some body parts are asymmetrical. This ‘monster’ has four eyes on one side and two on the other, for example.

The full answer to Riddle 36 must involve more than a man, woman, and horse, however. First of all, the image (*gelicnes*) of a dog and a bird must be accounted for. Moreover, the answer to be given is apparently twofold, for in the two halves of the riddle the same ‘creature’ seems to be imagined travelling first by land (*Ic wiht geseah on wege fēran*, 1) and then by sea (*Fōr flōdwegas*, 9a).

As Trautmann perceived (though he had some difficulty working out the details of his own solution), the enigmas of Riddle 36 evaporate when one imagines that the man and the woman are carrying a child and a dog with them on the horse’s back. In addition, a falcon must be borne on or close by the horse’s back as well. The number of body parts is thereby accounted for. The four legs of the

⁹ *The Riddles of Aldhelm*, ed. and trans. by J. H. Pitman (New Haven, 1925), pp. 50–51.

¹⁰ See Tupper, pp. 154–55, and Williamson, p. 249, for a discussion of the decoding strategy that may be operative here.

¹¹ See note 6 above. While my proposed solution is very similar to Trautmann’s, that ingenious author goes slightly astray (in my view) in wanting to emend away the riddler’s reference to a ship. He sees lines 9–14 as forming part of a separate riddle. In addition, he has a different way of accounting for the number of legs beneath the horse: he sees them as the legs of the horse itself, while I take them as belonging to the man and the woman, seeing that the legs are said to be located ‘under the belly’ of the horse, right where a rider would have them.

¹² Taylor, *English Riddles*, p. 28.

two adult riders, according to my understanding, dangle below the horse's belly, thus providing the creature's *fēowere fēt under wombe* (3). Situated on the back of the horse are the child, the dog, and the falcon with their total of eight feet, as required. The two wings (*tū fīpru*, 6a), of course, pertain to the falcon. If one does a head count (counting the man, the woman, the horse, the child, the dog, and the falcon), the total adds up to the requisite number, six. Correspondingly, the number of eyes comes to twelve. (No one-eyed creatures are present.) In the second half of the riddle, when this *ménage à six* then takes passage upon a boat, the vessel itself is a *fugul* 'bird' (9b), in keeping with the figurative imagery of Old English poetry whereby a ship with sails may 'fly like a bird'.¹³ The boat is scarcely the only 'creature' present, however, for not to be forgotten (since it is carried over from the first part of the riddle) is the 'image' of a *monn* 'person' (understood as either the man or the child), a horse, a dog, and a falcon, plus the 'countenance of a woman', as well. The 'monster' thus sets forth on the second stage of its journey in the form of a boat with its passengers. The answer that is accepted by most modern editors for Riddle 36, 'ship', therefore figures as part of the complex solution but is not the solution itself. This, in a nutshell, could be summarized as 'a family on the go', first by land and then by sea.

Riddle 58: A Rune Trick

After a riddle as bizarre as the one just discussed — what is that dog doing up there on the horse, anyway? — one turns with some relief to Riddle 58, which has a far more elegant solution. While the material solution to this riddle should occasion no debate (its modern English answer is 'well sweep'), its particular verbal stratagems have never been explained, and so its exact solution is still regarded as a mystery. I therefore offer the following answers to the twin questions 'What was the name of the well sweep in Anglo-Saxon England?' and 'What is the exact answer to Riddle 58?'. Although the answers to these two questions might be thought to be identical, there is a difference between them that is so clever as to have escaped notice.

The text reads as follows as edited by Muir:

Ic wat anfete ellen dreogan
 wiht on wonge. Wide ne fereð,
 ne fela rideð, ne fleogan mæg

¹³ A Beowulfian example of such a simile has been cited in chapter 1 above, at p. 32.

þurh scirne dæg, ne hie scip fereð,
 5 naca nægledbord; nyt bið hwæþre
 hyre mondryhtne monegum tidum.
 Hafað hefigne steort, heafod lytel,
 tungan lange, toð nænigne,
 isernes dæl; eorðgræf pæpeð.
 10 Wætan ne swelgeþ ne wiht iteþ,
 foþres ne gitsað, fereð oft swa þeah
 lagoflod on lyfte; life ne gielped,
 hlafordes gifum, hyred swa þeana
 þeodne sinum. Þry sind in naman
 15 ryhte runstafas, þara is Rad forma.¹⁴

(I know of a one-footed creature that performs a deed of strength in the field. It does not travel afar, nor does it go riding much, nor can it fly through the bright daylight, nor does a ship transport it, a riveted vessel. All the same, it is useful to its master on many occasions. It has a heavy tail, a small head, a long tongue, not a single tooth; part of it is made of iron. It travels over an earthen pit. It swallows no liquid, nor does it eat anything; it has no desire for food. All the same, it often transports water aloft. It does not boast of life, of the Lord's gifts; thus it obeys its master's servants. There are three right rune-staves in its name, of which Rad is the first.)

There can be little doubt as to what 'creature' is being described. The first thing the solver must do to get things right is to discount the numerous negations that are offered here: the 'creature' does not travel anywhere, nor does it eat or drink, nor does it enjoy the Lord's gift of life. We are therefore being told that it is an inanimate object. Moreover, it is a functional object, for it serves an earthly 'master' (6a, or that master's 'slaves', 13b–14a) by performing a 'deed of strength' (1b). Its function is to lift water up from a pit (9b, 11b–12a). The object can thus be nothing other than what in modern English is called a 'well sweep', or simply a 'sweep'.

The *OED* defines a 'sweep' in this sense as 'an apparatus for drawing water from a well, consisting of a long pole attached to an upright which serves as a fulcrum; hence, a pump-handle'.¹⁵ Not all well sweeps are exactly alike, of course. The form and function of a sweep of the Tudor era is described as follows by Sir Thomas Elyot:

A great poste and high is set faste, then ouer it cometh a longe beame, which renneth on a pynne, so that the one ende hauing more poyse [weight] then the other, causeth

¹⁴ Muir, 1, 325–26.

¹⁵ The *OED*, s.v. 'sweep' (sb.), sense 23.

the lighter ende to rise; with suche beere brewers in London dooe drawe vp water, thei call it a sweepe.¹⁶

What the Exeter Book text describes, accordingly, seems to be a sweep that has the specific form of a long beam that pivots on an upright base, rather like an asymmetrical see-saw. One end of the beam (the heavy ‘tail’ of 7a) serves as a counterweight to the beam’s long stem, which terminates in a ‘small head’ (7b). To the ‘head’, apparently, is attached a ‘long tongue’ (8a), in an apparent reference to a pole that is lowered up and down in the well. The part of the structure that is made of metal (9a) is probably the pivot (the ‘pynne’ of Elyot’s description), though it could be the pail. One or more persons are required to ply the well sweep, and these are the servants mentioned in verses 13b–14a.

Still, what was the Old English name for this device? A very particular word is specified in verses 14b–15: ‘There are three right rune-staves in the name, of which *rād* [that is, the rune **R**, which conventionally bears that name] is the first.’ No modern scholar has been able to adduce an OE word of only three letters, beginning with *r*, which could mean ‘well sweep’. Williamson is surely on the right track, however, when he suggests *radrod* ‘riding-rod, sweep?’ as the word to be guessed.¹⁷ What *rād* would mean in this suggested compound is ‘the act of riding’ (B-T, s.v. *rād*, sense I), hence ‘sweeping’ up and down, while *rōd* denotes ‘a rod, pole’ (B-T, s.v. *rōd*, sense I). These two simplexes readily yield the conjectural compound **rād-rōd* ‘well sweep’. There is a problem if that word is taken to be the riddle’s outright solution, however, for its total number of letters is six rather than the required three. If one count the number of different letters instead of tallying their total number, then that stratagem works out no better, for there are four instead of three.

Try writing out this same answer in *rūn-stafas* ‘runic letters’, however, taking verse 15a with its explicit allusion to the **R** rune as a prompt in this direction. Let the initial rune **R** stand for its own name *rād*. The result of this stratagem,

¹⁶ This passage dating from 1548 serves as the first of seven illustrative quotations given by the *OED* for ‘sweep’. In an article published about fifty years ago, L. Blakeley, ‘Riddles 22 and 58 of the Exeter Book’, *Review of English Studies*, n.s., 9 (1958), 241–52 (at p. 248) offers a description of well sweeps of the kind then still in use in Europe (as they may still be in some regions today). See further Williamson, p. 311 (his commentary on what is numbered Riddle 56 in his edition).

¹⁷ Williamson, p. 312, making a tentative proposal based upon C. W. M. Grein’s prior suggestion that the word in question is (unattested) **rād-pyt* ‘riding-well’, or well sweep. Blakeley, ‘Riddles 22 and 58’, suggests (unattested) **rād-lim* ‘moving beam’, or sweep (pp. 248–49).

ƿ-ƿƿ ƿ *rād-rōd* or ‘well sweep’, must be the exact solution to the riddle, for it consists of no more nor less than ‘three right rune-staves’. Here is an instance where an Exeter Book riddle not only has to be answered in its own tongue; it also has to be answered in its own tongue *as encoded in runes*, one of which stands in for the corresponding rune-name. Since **rād-rōd* is not a word that is attested in the extant Old English records, there can be no final certainty about this solution; but on the basis of Exeter Book Riddle 58, it is a fair guess that if a text from the Anglo-Saxon period should ever be discovered in which a sweep is named, this is the name it will have.

Riddle 70:5–6: Candle, Candle, Burning Bright

There is a third riddle for which a more attractive answer can be found than the one that is currently accepted. This is the text that in the ASPR edition is printed as lines 5–6 of Riddle 70 but that properly, as John Collins Pope has pointed out,¹⁸ should stand alone as a separate riddle, even if a mere fragment of one. Muir titles these two lines ‘Riddle 70’, thus acknowledging their independent status. While accepting Muir’s editorial judgement, for the sake of consistency in numeration I will refer to these lines as ‘Riddle 70:5–6’.

Owing to its fragmentary state, this small puzzle offers somewhat less to engage one’s wits than do the two riddles discussed so far in this chapter. Indeed, one suspects that the chief reason that no satisfactory answer for it has yet been given is that almost no one has thought the prize worth the taking. As edited by Muir, the riddle consists of no more than the following lines (his ellipses):

... þe swa wrætlice be wege stonde
heah ond hleortorht hæleþum to nytte.¹⁹

(... [I], who stand so beautifully beside the path, tall and bright in the cheek, as a service to human beings.)

¹⁸ John Collins Pope, ‘An Unsuspected Lacuna in the Exeter Book: Divorce Proceedings for an Ill-Matched Couple in the Old English Riddles’, *Speculum*, 49 (1974), 615–22, is surely correct in supposing that a leaf has been lost, in a previous copy of this part of the Exeter Book, between the two riddle fragments that the manuscript presents (and that all earlier editors therefore print) as a single riddle (with text as in K-D, p. 70).

¹⁹ Muir, I, 363. The fragment is counted as ‘Riddle 70’ in his edition. In Williamson’s edition it is number 68.

All that one can say about the mystery item that is imagined to be speaking these lines is that it is of practical use, it is tall and bright, and it stands ‘beside the path’ in a curious or beautiful fashion. Since the adverb *wrætlice* and the corresponding adjective *wrætlic* are often used in the riddles with reference to crafted objects,²⁰ one can infer with some confidence that the speaker is a tall shining object that is set beside a path. What Pope would have this item be, partly on the basis of the precedent of Aldhelm’s Riddle 92 (*Faros editissima*),²¹ is a lighthouse. Williamson agrees with Pope (although with some reticence, adding a question mark when offering that solution), and Muir confidently concurs.²²

No trace of a specific debt to Aldhelm’s text can be seen here, however. Moreover, lighthouses were few and far between in the early northern world. There is no indication in these lines (which, admittedly, are no more than a fragment of what was once a longer text) that such a complex and imposing structure as a lighthouse is being described. The compound adjective *hlēor-torht* ‘bright-cheeked’ that is used to describe this object might conceivably refer to a lighthouse, but that otherwise unattested adjective does not give much away, for in poetry, almost any bright object that is personified might be characterized as ‘bright-cheeked’. I will therefore make an alternative suggestion. The speaker whose name is to be guessed is a candle.

The key that opens the door leading to this solution is the phrase *be wege*. Critics have debated whether this phrase refers to a path on land, or whether (with *be wege* construed as *be wæge*) what it means is ‘by the water’ or ‘by the sea’. Pope, Williamson, and Muir are all inclined to accept the former reading, ‘by the path’. No one has entertained the possibility, however, that the word *weg* is used metaphorically, and that what it refers to is the ‘path’ made by script on a page. In line 6 of Riddle 51 (solved as ‘quill pen and fingers’), what the plural

²⁰ The adverb *wrætlice* in verse 1a of this riddle has a range of meaning that extends from ‘wondrously’, ‘curiously’ to ‘beautifully’, ‘elegantly’. Either *wrætlic* or *wrætlice* occurs no fewer than twenty times in the riddles in conjunction with any number of items, most of which are crafted objects. While several of these objects are deluxe items (the Gospel codex of Riddle 26, the psalter of Riddle 47, and the chalice of Riddle 59), most are quite mundane. The everyday items include a bow (Riddle 23), bagpipes (Riddle 31), a key (Riddle 44), a quill pen (Riddle 51), a weapon rack (Riddle 55), and a church bell (Riddle 70:1–4). To use the terms *wrætlic* or *wrætlice* with reference to everyday items must be counted as one aspect of the riddler’s rhetoric of deception. (The riddle solutions cited in this note are justified elsewhere in this book, in those instances where justification is necessary.)

²¹ *Riddles of Aldhelm*, ed. and trans. by Pitman, pp. 54–55; Williamson, p. 339.

²² Williamson, pp. 339–40; Muir, II, 736.

form of this noun (spelled *wægas*) refers to are lines of script patiently produced through the labours of a scribe. This riddle too includes the adverb *wrætlice*, used to refer to the movement of the pen over the page. I suggest that what we have here are two lines that pertain to a previously unidentified ‘riddle of the scriptorium’.²³ From his (or its) own perspective, the personified candle does indeed stand ‘tall’ and ‘bright-cheeked’ beside the ‘path’ that it illumines. The wit of this riddle resides largely in its subversion of the anthropocentric expectation that something that is ‘tall’ should be taller than a human being, when in fact the size of the item to be guessed must be reckoned in relation to its own surroundings.²⁴

One reason why ‘candle’ is to be preferred to ‘lighthouse’ as the solution to Riddle 70:5–6 is that candles were commonplace features of the Anglo-Saxons’ material world, whereas lighthouses have always been unusual and exotic structures. The *DOE* notes about forty-five instances of the word *candel* in Old English and also cites the following special terms: *candel-bregd* and *candel-weoce* ‘candle-wick’; *candel-snyttels* and *candel-twist* ‘instrument used for trimming candles’ (or perhaps ‘candle-snuffer’); and *candel-stæf*, *candel-sticca*, and *candel-trēow* ‘candlestick’, leaving aside *candel-mæsse* ‘Candlemas’ and its derivative forms. The frequency with which the word *candel* and its compounds occur in the corpus of Old English speaks to the importance of this material item in the Anglo-Saxon social world, particularly in the monastic settings that would have been familiar to any textual community served by the Exeter Book. In his ‘Letter to Wulfsgie’, Ælfric comments on the specific use of candles in the Mass. Offering the following definition of the Latin term *acolutus* ‘acolyte’, he writes: ‘Acolitus is gecweden se þe candele oððe tapor byrð to Godes þenungum, þonne mann godspell ræt oððe þonne man halgað þæt husl æt þam weofode’²⁵ (‘Acolyte’ is the name for the person who carries the candle or taper to God’s services, when the Gospel is read or the Eucharist is blessed at the altar). This casual remark by a lifelong servant of Christ confirms that candles were routinely used

²³ Laurence K. Shook, ‘Riddles Relating to the Anglo-Saxon Scriptorium’, in *Essays in Honour of Anton Charles Pegis*, ed. by J. Reginald O’Donnell (Toronto, 1974), pp. 215–36.

²⁴ The likelihood that ‘candle’ is the intended solution to Riddle 70:5–6 is strengthened when one takes into account that Aldhelm’s Riddle 52 has the solution *Candela*. While no Latin parallel can ‘prove’ the solution to an Exeter Book riddle, the existence of such a parallel shows the inherent plausibility of such a solution, especially when the item in question is a routine part of the human lifeworld.

²⁵ *Die Hirtenbriefe Ælfrics*, ed. by Bernhard Fehr, Bibliothek der Angelsächsischen Prosa 9 (Hamburg, 1914), § 33 (p. 9).

in England in conjunction with the divine office, including those moments when scripture was read out loud. This is as should be expected, for the *Regularis Concordia* (the 'charter' of the Benedictine Reform of the later tenth century in England) includes several specific provisions regarding the use of candles in the liturgy. Among these is the specification that on the days between the feast of the Innocents and the Octave of Christmas, 'all the bells shall ring at Nocturns and Vespers as at Mass [. . .]. Candles shall be lit at Matins and all the bells shall peal and the thurible shall be carried round'.²⁶ On the basis of such references, the 'path' referred to in Riddle 70:5–6 could be construed literally as the aisle of a church or any other processional way, though what I prefer to see here (because of the greater ingenuity of that metaphor) is a reference to the lines of script in a book.

As for 'lighthouse', the consideration that there is no known Old English word for that structure counts against its choice as the solution to Riddle 70:5–6. All over the world, the typical strategy of riddling is to describe a familiar thing in terms that make it seem rare and strange. As F. H. Whitman remarks while citing a study of social riddling in the Philippine Islands, 'The pleasure of riddling lies in tricking the hearer about an object anyone should realize'.²⁷ Since the usual OE term for candle is *candel* (though *tapor* also occurs with some frequency), I offer that word as the precise solution.

One other reason to favour the choice of 'candle' over 'lighthouse' is that Riddle 70:5–6 follows immediately after a riddle whose most plausible answer is *circe-belle* 'church-bell'. These two riddles therefore function as a pair, for their solutions are two items of liturgical use that are often conjoined with one another, whether in word or in deed (as in the passage from the *Regularis Concordia* just quoted). Other duos of this kind are attested in the Exeter Book. Riddles 27 'mead' and 28 'ale' are a fairly straightforward example. Riddles 17 (plausibly solved as either 'quiver' or 'bee-skep')²⁸ and 18 ('jug') are another, for these items are analogous to one another in shape and to some extent perform a similar function, in that they serve as containers. I have already had occasion to suggest that Riddles 73 ('spear made of ash wood') and 74 ('boat made of oak wood') form

²⁶ *Regularis Concordia: The Monastic Agreement of the Monks and Nuns of the English Nation*, ed. and trans. by Dom Thomas Symons (London, 1953), pp. 29–30; I omit the Latin for the sake of brevity. For an overview of this document and its significance, see the two articles by Lucia Kornexl in *Medieval England* and in *Blackwell Encyclopaedia*, s.v. 'Regularis Concordia'.

²⁷ F. H. Whitman, *Old English Riddles* (Ottawa, 1982), p. 15.

²⁸ For brief discussion of these solutions, see p. 145 below, note 5.

a thematic pair, as Riddles 55 ('weapon rack') and 56 ('loom') may do. Even Riddles 20 ('sword') and 21 ('plough') might be thought to constitute a pair when read with reference to Isaiah 2. 4, 'Et conflagant gladios suos in vomeres' (and they shall beat their swords into plowshares).²⁹ If a solution that is proposed for a problematic riddle can be shown to be one member of a pair of closely related items that follow one another in immediate succession, then that pairing can be counted in its favour. An example of the heuristic value of this principle is Mercedes Salvador's approach to Riddle 78, one whose text is so severely mutilated as seemingly to admit of no solution. By showing that what is described is an aquatic predator, by noting that Riddle 77 describes an oyster, and by showing that crabs and oysters are often discussed as a pair in medieval Latin encyclopedic literature (the oyster being said to be a favourite food of the crab), she makes a persuasive case for the solution 'crab'.³⁰

Riddle 75/76: At the Sign of the 'Hound and Hind'

The Exeter Book riddle that Williamson prints as number 73 in his edition is a difficult one whose solution is still in doubt, though (as we will see) a great stride has recently been made towards its solution. In the ASPR edition the text is printed as two separate riddles, 75 and 76. I will therefore refer to it as 'Riddle 75/76' in deference to that standard numbering system, while also making clear my understanding that the lines in question form two complementary parts of a single riddle.

Like other riddles of the Exeter Book (notably Riddles 19, 24, and 42), Riddle 75/76 involves runic cryptography. One may be confident that in this instance, as in those other three, its runes spell out its solution. What that solution is, still, is very difficult to discern. The lines read as follows as edited by Williamson:

Ic swiftne geseah on swaþe feran
 ·**Ɱ**·**Ɱ**·**Ɱ**·**Ɱ**·
 Ic ane geseah idese sittan.³¹

²⁹ *Biblia sacra*, p. 1098; *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocrypha*, ed. by Herbert G. May and Bruce M. Metzger (New York, 1977), p. 825.

³⁰ Mercedes Salvador, 'The Oyster and the Crab: A Riddle Duo (nos. 77 and 78) in the *Exeter Book*', *MPh*, 101 (2004), 400–19.

³¹ Williamson, p. 110.

While this passage may seem so fragmentary or elliptical as to resist translation, what it means literally is ‘I saw a swift one [something masculine in gender] going along the track. **DNLH**. I saw a solitary one [something feminine in gender], a lady sitting.’³² Whatever the answer is, it therefore depends on the interplay of two items, one of them masculine and mobile and the other one feminine and stationary.

The solution that Williamson proposes for this riddle, ‘piss’, has the virtue of novelty. He arrives at that answer first by reading the runic characters in reverse order as **HLND**, and then by expanding those letters into the OE word *hland* ‘urine’ in a brave effort to answer this riddle in its own tongue. In his construction of the riddle’s imagery, there is a play on the contrasting way in which men and women pass urine, the man by standing upright (so that the stream of urine cascades down onto a path, the *swapu* of 1b) and the woman by squatting, perhaps beside the same path.

While this solution has found a receptive welcome in some quarters,³³ I find it doubtful for three reasons. First, if Riddle 75/76 is not to give its own answer away, something other than a woman ought to be denoted by the noun *idese*. According to the usual conventions of the riddle genre, what one would expect to find here is metaphor, not the literal use of a common noun. Second, one would scarcely expect urine to be denoted by the phrase ‘the swift one’ (singular in number). There is awkwardness about that phrasing that will not go away. Third, the fact that *hland* is a neuter noun practically rules out Williamson’s solution. What is required is a masculine noun to stand in grammatical agreement with the adjectival form *swiftne* (1a).³⁴

³² Since the placement of *āne* before the caesura has an intensifying effect, I take that word in sense 4 of the *DOE* entry for *ān*: ‘Indicating isolation or exclusiveness, “alone, only, one and only”.’ If one prefers a flaccid translation, nothing rules out taking *āne* as an adjective modifying *idese* and rendering the line ‘I saw a lady sitting’.

³³ Muir, II, 737 (his riddle number 75). Jonathan Wilcox, “‘Tell Me What I Am’: The Old English Riddles”, in *Readings in Medieval Texts: Interpreting Old and Middle English Literature*, ed. by David F. Johnson and Elaine Treharne (Oxford, 2005), pp. 46–59, declares Riddle 75/76 ‘brilliantly solved’ by Williamson’s suggestion (at p. 56). I have conversed with other specialists who accept Williamson’s ‘urine’ solution with equal enthusiasm.

³⁴ Williamson, p. 354, attempts to minimize this problem by suggesting that either (1) gender is unimportant here or (2) the gender of the noun *hland* was unstable. Neither of these suggestions seems to me very persuasive. See pp. 105–08 below for discussion of the role of grammatical gender in the riddles, with many examples.

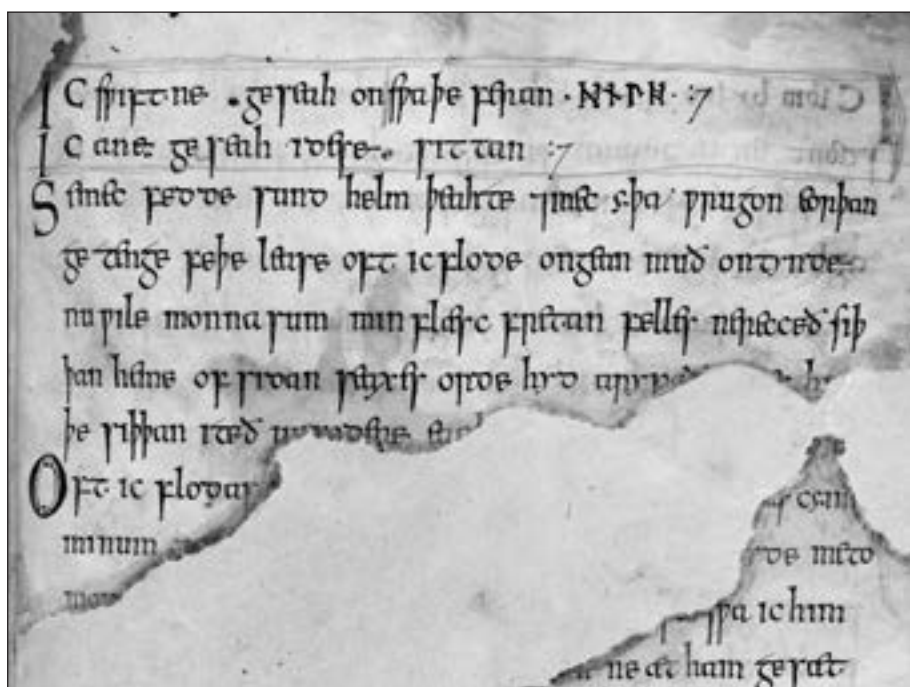


Figure 5. Exeter Book Riddle 75/76.
Exeter, Cathedral Library, MS 3501, fol. 127r.

My own proposed reading of these lines depends on a different understanding of the value of the inscribed runes (for a facsimile of which see Fig. 5). The third of the three runes as written by the Exeter Book scribe is clearly the L-rune Γ . What I suggest has happened at some point in the scribal transmission of this riddle is that a visual pun has been lost. The symbol that is now to be read at this point has resulted from a scribe's misunderstanding of the riddler's intention, which was to present the reader with an ambiguously drawn \mathbf{N} , $\mathbf{\Gamma}$, or \mathbf{I} (the runic equivalents of the roman letters \mathbf{U} , \mathbf{L} , and \mathbf{I} , respectively). Someone at some point has disambiguated this symbol as the L-rune $\mathbf{\Gamma}$, thereby somewhat spoiling the joke. My hypothesis is that what once stood here was a character whose upright descender was clearly defined but whose second stroke, descending diagonally to the right, was written in such a manner as to leave doubt as to which rune was intended. Reading the sequence of four runes in reverse order,

and discounting the meaningless possibility **HLND** (for it lacks a vowel), the word encoded here could then be construed as either **HUND** 'hound' or **HIND** 'hind', 'female deer'. These two words when taken together constitute the riddle's solution, which is the alliterative doublet *hund ond hīnd*.³⁵

Line 1 of the riddle thus alludes to a hound running along a track. Line 2 alludes to a deer in hiding. The swiftness of the hound is contrasted to the immobility of the hind, who 'freezes' to avoid the hunt in the manner characteristic of her species. The solution proposed here for Riddle 75/76, *hund ond hīnd*, thus resembles the indubitable answer to Riddle 42 (*hana ond hæn* 'rooster and hen') in that it is an alliterative doublet that refers to a pair of conceptually linked animals.³⁶ The solution *hund ond hīnd* has the advantage of constituting a kind of cliché of the sport of venery.³⁷ As is typical with the riddles, a familiar scene from the human lifeworld is evoked in terms that make it seem strange or exotic.

The solution that I propose for Riddle 75/76 is not without precedent. In his editio princeps of the Exeter Book, Benjamin Thorpe emended the third rune in the sequence to **U** and then read the four runes (in reversed order) as **HUND**.³⁸ Thorpe did not see either a visual pun or a hind here, however, for he did not regard the two lines that frame the runes as two halves of a single riddle. Other scholars have pursued interpretations along related lines. Norman Eliason takes the *idese* in verse 3b to refer to a doe, but (reading the first group of runes as **DNLH** and interpreting them according to a unique system of cryptography) he interprets the first word as *eolh* 'elk'. He therefore does not see either a visual pun or a hound here, and his solution to the riddle as a whole is 'an elk and its female' or, taking the viewer as the topic of the riddle, 'elk-hunter'.³⁹ Finally and most pertinently (as I only became aware after my own thoughts concerning this riddle had come into focus), Roberta J. Dewa has mounted a somewhat different argument in favour of seeing the nouns *hund* and *hīnd* encoded here. She advances this suggestion on the grounds that the **L**-rune 'may function as an arbi-

³⁵ In the next chapter, at pp. 122–27, I discuss alliterative doublets as attractive solutions to a number of Exeter Book riddles.

³⁶ In that same regard it resembles the solution that, in the next chapter, I will propose for Riddle 15, *fox ond hund*.

³⁷ A search of the Corpus of Old English reveals five instances where the words *hund* and *hīnd* appear in a single sentence in the context of venery.

³⁸ *Codex Exoniensis*, ed. by Benjamin Thorpe (London, 1842), p. 487.

³⁹ Norman E. Eliason, 'Four Old English Cryptographic Riddles', *SPh*, 49 (1952), 553–65 (at pp. 554–56).

trary vowel-symbol' analogous to what is found in the runic inscription on the right side of the Franks Casket. In her view, such a manipulation of the usual shape of the runes contributes to the 'creative linguistic dislocation' for which she finds evidence throughout the cryptographic riddles.⁴⁰ The fact that Dewa and I have arrived at the same solution independently, even if through somewhat different reasoning, may be thought to add weight to this manner of reading one of the most problematic textual passages of the Exeter Book.

In sum, while my arguments for *hund ond hind* as the solution to Riddle 75/76 must remain tentative for they rest in part on a conjecture about scribal miswriting, Williamson's solution *hland* is unattractive for the reasons stated above. The basic concept by which Dewa and I recommend approaching this part of the Exeter Book makes sense of a riddle (or a pair of riddles) that must otherwise be regarded as 'unsolved'.

These, then, are four riddles of the Exeter Book (to add to the two discussed in previous chapters) for which more exact or satisfying solutions can be found than have yet been hit upon. In the next chapter I will propose that, through a very simple stratagem, a number of additional riddles from that same collection can be ascribed more apt answers than they have yet received. Moreover, six of these answers will be shown to be so linguistically responsive to the conditions set forth in their respective texts that those six 'punning' riddles, too, can now be counted as satisfactorily solved.

⁴⁰ Roberta J. Dewa, 'The Runic Riddles of the Exeter Book: Language Games and Anglo-Saxon Scholarship', *Nottingham Medieval Studies*, 39 (1995), 26–36 (pp. 33–35).

ANSWERING THE RIDDLES IN THEIR OWN TONGUE

With their calculated ambiguities and their innate will to deceive, the Old English riddles of the Exeter Book test one's ingenuity in countless ways. The challenge that they pose is linguistic as well as conceptual in nature, for the riddles are phrased in the notoriously slippery medium of words. Their answers, too, must normally be words rather than things.¹

The problem of unriddling these small puzzles can be aggravated by the modern convention whereby solutions are posed in the language of the present day. In accord with that convention, some riddles are now regarded as 'solved' in the absence of any discussion of how those solutions might be affected by differences between current English and Old English. Moreover (as has been

I wish to thank Mercedes Salvador and Jonathan Wilcox for reading this chapter in advance of publication and for offering a number of suggestions for its improvement. Neither, of course, is likely to agree with my proposed riddle solutions in a given instance. In addition, Patrizia Lendinara kindly sent me copies of some of her learned and lucid articles on the riddles that I would not otherwise have been able to consult. I have also benefited from the chance to read Andy Orchard's essay 'Enigma Variations: The Anglo-Saxon Riddle-Tradition', in *Latin Learning and English Lore: Studies in Anglo-Saxon Literature for Michael Lapidge*, ed. by Katherine O'Brien O'Keeffe and Andy Orchard, 2 vols (Toronto, 2005), I, 284–304, even though this stimulating article came into my hands too late for me to take account of here. The point that I raise in note 5 below concerning the potential interchangeability of Latin and Old English answers to the Exeter Book riddles is in keeping with the spirit of Orchard's approach to Anglo-Latin and Old English riddling as two parts of a single tradition.

¹ As Danielle M. Roemer points out in her article 'Riddles and Puzzles', in *American Folklore: An Encyclopedia*, ed. by Jan Harold Brunvand (New York, 1996), pp. 628–32, there does exist a category of 'visual descriptive riddles' (sometimes called 'doodles') that are pictorial rather than verbal in nature, but this type does not need to be considered here.

shown in each of the previous chapters), the expedient of paying close attention to the Old English lexicon can help yield a plausible answer to a riddle for which no consensus solution has been found. While modern scholars have often agonized over the word-by-word interpretation of Exeter Book texts, only rarely have they proposed solutions to those riddles in the terms of that same verbal system.² The result has been some fuzziness in the critical literature and more than a few missed opportunities.

'A rose is a rose is a rose is a rose', the American modernist writer Gertrude Stein wrote, thereby provoking her readers to make more than the most obvious sense of what seems at first to be 'an overly insistent, even wearisome tautology'.³ Try repeating this same sentence two or three times, letting the syllables flow in the rhythms of natural speech, and the purpose towards which Stein's wit is directed begins to emerge. Through play on the clause 'a rose is', the plural noun 'roses', and the verb 'arose', a solitary rose is transmuted into an ascending bouquet: we can almost imagine ourselves watching while 'roses arose' as if by a magician's trick.

Stein's motto — her caress of a noun, as she called it⁴ — embodies one of the main tenets of modernist and postmodernist thought; namely, that the language that we speak is in constant rebellion against its merely referential function. While solid objects (a rose, a reed, a heap of iron ore) are subject to the inertia

² Exceptions to this tendency are legion. One scholar of an earlier generation who made diligent efforts to answer the Exeter Book riddles in their own tongue is Moritz Trautmann in his learned articles on that genre. He did not choose to pursue that approach in his edition *Die altenglischen Rätsel* (Heidelberg, 1915), however, perhaps because that book was intended for a broader audience. Another example is Laurence K. Shook in the article to which reference is made in note 33 below. Other examples are integrated into the discussion that follows. I am not aware, however, of any recent systematic attempt along these lines.

³ Henry M. Sayre, 'The Artist's Model: American Art and the Question of Looking Like Gertrude Stein', in *Gertrude Stein and the Making of Literature*, ed. by Shirley Neuman and Ira B. Nadel (Boston, 1988), pp. 21–41 (p. 24). Stein's first used the tautology in her poem 'Sacred Emily', written in 1913 and first published in her collection *Geography and Plays* (1922). There, appearing without the initial indefinite article 'A', the words may have reference to a real or imagined lover going under the name or pseudonym of 'Rose'. Later, with the initial article added, the same words served Stein as a motto: she printed them in ring form as a letterhead for her stationery and used them, also in ring form to suggest an eternal return, on the cover of *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*. I am grateful to my colleague Cyrena Pondrom for instruction on these points.

⁴ Sayre, 'Artist's Model', quotes Stein as explaining her tautology as follows: 'I caressed completely caressed and addressed a noun' (p. 24).

that weighs down all bodily things, the language that refers to such things is a volatile medium with an innate capacity for kaleidoscopic movement.

With regard to no other type of medieval literature is that observation truer than with the riddle, a genre whose soul is deception. The point for which I wish to argue here as a general principle is that, whenever feasible, a riddle ought to be answered *in the language in which it is posed*. When analyzing the riddles of the Exeter Book, in particular, much is to be gained when those puzzles are answered in a manner that a native speaker of Old English would have regarded as *on folcisc*; that is to say, ‘in native idiom’.⁵ Answers that can command general assent are then more likely to be found. Moreover, the artistry of the Exeter Book riddles will then be revealed most fully, and their value as sources for social history and the history of mentalities will be enhanced. If on the other hand a solution to an Exeter Book riddle is offered only in modern English, then the complex literary and linguistic play that is at stake in this genre of poetry may go unobserved. The result of this lost opportunity may be that even if an answer is the ‘right’ one in a material sense, it will be linguistically inadequate; and since the Exeter Book riddles are examples of complex linguistic wordplay, this verbal dimension may be the one that matters most.

Cryptography and Grammatical Gender in the Riddles

In two regards, my argument is a non-controversial one that is accepted in the critical literature. First of all, certain Exeter Book riddles literally spell out their own names through the cryptographic use of runes or normal letters. Second, Old English nouns and adjectives were inflected according to grammatical

⁵ See the *DOE*, s.v. *folcisc*, sense 2.a. In addition, the possibility should not be ruled out that certain riddles were designed to be answered in Latin even if posed in the vernacular. The riddles that are most likely to fall into this category are the learned ones (Riddles 40, 66, and 94) that are customarily ascribed the answer ‘Creation’. The OE word *gesceaft* (or *frumsceaft* or *weorold-gesceaft*) is an apt answer in these instances, but an even better choice (given that these riddles show a debt to Aldhelm) might be Lat. *creatura*. Riddles posed on the topic of liturgical objects might aptly be answered either in Latin (*paten*; *calyx*) or in the vernacular (*hūsel-disc*; *hūsel-fæt*, respectively), as is discussed below. Other examples of riddles that, in a monastic setting, could plausibly be answered in Latin even if posed in English are numbers 9 (*cuculus*), 10 (*bernaca*), 35 (*lorica*), and perhaps 39 (*somnium*) and 93 (*atramentorium*).

gender, and therefore, inflectional markers can provide a clue as to a riddle's exact linguistic solution.⁶ Each of these categories is worth attention in turn.

(1) *Cryptography*. Six Exeter Book riddles (numbers 19, 23, 24, 42, 58, and 75/76) spell out their answers through cryptography.⁷ Naturally, the solution to

⁶ Any imagined hints of this kind must be reviewed with caution, of course, since gender-specific inflections could be the result of various factors including scribal blunder or a scribe's false assumption as to what the correct answer to a riddle is. Trautmann stands out among earlier scholars in regard to his alertness to the possible importance of grammatical gender in the riddles. When discussing the solution to Riddle 74 (p. 36 above) I have had occasion to quote his remarks on that topic from 'Alte und neue Antworten auf altenglischen Rätsel', *Bonner Beiträge zur Anglistik*, 19 (1905), 167–215. Trautmann reiterated his position in 'Das Geschlecht in den altenglischen Rätseln', *Beiblatt zur Anglia*, 25 (1914), 324–27: 'Ein ding, das seinem grammatischen geschlechte nach männlich ist, stellen sie, wenn sie es vermenschlichen oder redend einführen, immer als mann (männliches wesen) dar, eins aber, das grammatisch weiblich ist, immer als frau (weibliches wesen) (p. 324; Something whose grammatical gender is masculine is represented as male (as a masculine being) when it is personified or is represented as speaking; but something whose grammatical gender is female is always represented as female (as a female being)). Trautmann's categorical claim regarding the significance of grammatical gender in the riddles was disputed by Frederick Tupper, Jr, who was well attuned to the significance of this feature of the language of the riddles but did not consider it a reliable guide to solutions. As he remarks in the introduction to his 1910 edition of the riddles, gender inflections may point the way towards one or another specific word as a solution, but even then the evidence for that word may not be conclusive, for 'in many of these cases we cannot know what Anglo-Saxon word the riddler had in mind' to express a given idea (p. xc, the first note). I attempt here to find a middle ground between these two positions, one of which seems to me overly assured and the other one overly sceptical. Some of the examples of grammatical gender that are cited in this chapter have previously been noted by Trautmann, Tupper, or others.

⁷ I adopt Krapp and Dobbie's standard numeration of the riddles. In the present chapter (unless noted otherwise), quotations of Exeter Book texts are drawn from that edition as well. A helpful overview of the Exeter Book riddles and their basis in the Latin tradition of literary riddling is provided by David R. Johnson, 'Riddles, Old English', in *Medieval England*, pp. 642–43. When discussing accepted solutions to the riddles, my chief guides are Williamson and the three relevant sections of Muir (II, 655–63, 693, and 735–39); my own favoured solutions are listed in the appendix to this chapter. Patrizia Lendinara, 'Gli enigmi del Codex Exoniense: Una ricerca bibliographica', *AION*, sezione germanica 19 (1976), 231–329, offers a comprehensive list of critical studies on the riddles published up to that date (at pp. 252–310), organized chronologically with information about the solutions offered by individual scholars. For an overview of the Exeter Book riddles that employ runic cryptography, see Page, pp. 187–91. Roberta J. Dewa, 'The Runic Riddles of the Exeter Book: Language Games and Anglo-Saxon Scholarship', *Nottingham Medieval Studies*, 39 (1995), 26–36, offers a stimulating discussion of this subgenre, which is also analyzed by Norman E. Eliason, 'Four Old English Cryptographic Riddles', *SPb*, 49 (1952), 553–65.

each of these is an Old English word or phrase rather than a modern one. The answer to Riddle 19 had eluded modern scholarship until Mark Griffith pointed it out in an article published in 1992. There now can be no doubt that the solution is the OE word *snac(c)* 'light warship', a word that is very cleverly spelled out in runes.⁸ The answer to Riddle 23 is *boga* 'bow', a solution that should cause little difficulty because it is announced in normal insular script in the first line, with the letters reversed as **agof** — a miswriting, perhaps a deliberate one, of **agob** (*boga* with letters reversed). Once the runes of Riddle 24 are set out in the requisite order and transliterated, the answer is revealed to be *higora*, a name for which 'magpie' is a likely modern English equivalent. Riddle 42 — a sexually explicit one — similarly spells out, through use of the conventional names of the runes, the alliterative doublet *hana ond hæn* 'cock and hen'. Riddle 58 is solved in the preceding chapter as **ƿ-R-ƿ-FH** 'rād-rōd' or 'well sweep', and the solution *hund ond hīnd* for Riddle 75/76 is offered there more tentatively as well.

(2) *Grammatical gender*. A clear example of the significance of grammatical gender in determining the solution to a riddle is Riddle 16, which has the consensus solution 'anchor'. The exact answer is not the concept 'anchor', however, as is sometimes carelessly stated or assumed; rather it is the OE word *ancor*, which is grammatically masculine, for the riddle is phrased in such a manner that only a masculine noun will provide the solution.⁹ Similarly, the correct answer to Riddle 21 is not the concept 'plough', but rather the OE noun *sulh* 'plough', which is grammatically feminine.¹⁰ There are other examples that are just as straightforward as these, or nearly so.¹¹

⁸ Mark S. Griffith, 'Riddle 19 of the Exeter Book', *N&Q*, n.s., 39 (1992), 15–16. The *snacc* (Old Icelandic *snekkja*) was a light and swift warship. Griffith hit upon this solution by taking the first letter of each of the four runic clusters that figure in this poem and combining them; the result in transliterated form is **SNAC**. While *snacc* is usually spelled with its final consonant doubled, an orthographical variation such as this is acceptable seeing that what we are dealing with is 'code-language' rather than normal script. The variant spelling may even be part of a strategy of deception. Compare the runic spellings **MAN**, **WEGA**, and **HAFOC** in this same riddle, where they stand in for normal West Saxon *monn*, *wiga*, and *hafoc*, respectively.

⁹ Note *mec stīþne* (9a), where the adjective carries the masculine accusative singular inflection. Riddle 16 is an instance where the answer could not be posed in Latin, for Lat. *ancora* is feminine.

¹⁰ Note *mē* [. . .] *gongendre* (9a) and *mē* [. . .] *hindewardre* (14b–15a), where two instances of feminine inflection reveal the grammatical gender of the speaking subject.

¹¹ Additional examples of riddles whose accepted answers are confirmed through grammatical gender are the following. Riddle 9, solved as 'cuckoo': the OE answer, the masculine

Many riddles of the Exeter Book have no consensus solution, of course. In such instances, one can sometimes turn to grammatical gender to see if it provides evidence either confirming an attractive solution or ruling out other possibilities. Riddle 4, for example, has recently been solved as ‘bucket’. Clear notice that the answer to this riddle must be a masculine noun (note verse 5a, *mec slæp wērigne*) tends to confirm that solution, for the noun *stoppa* (the common OE name for ‘bucket’, a Celtic borrowing) is of masculine gender. Similarly, the double entendre Riddle 61 is aptly solved as ‘shirt’. The masculine inflection in verse 8a of this riddle (*mec fræt wedne*) is supportive of the conclusion that the answer to the riddle when posed in Old English is the masculine noun *cyrstel* ‘tunic, shirt’. The ‘coat of mail’ that has been proposed as an alternative solution to this riddle can be very nearly ruled out, for OE *byrne* is a feminine noun. The aptness of ‘augur’ (a boring tool) as a solution to Riddle 62 is likewise confirmed through grammatical gender, for the OE name for an augur, the masculine noun *naflu-gār*, is consistent with the three masculine inflections in lines 5–9a (beginning with *mec* [. . .] *æftan weardne*).

Another example where grammatical gender points to a plausible answer is Riddle 49. While this riddle has been found to be of uncertain solution,¹² an

noun *gēac*, is confirmed by the masculine inflection in line 1 (*mec* [. . .] *dēadne*). Riddle 10, solved as ‘barnacle goose’: the OE answer, the feminine noun *byrnete*, is confirmed by the feminine inflection in 9a (*mec lifgende*). Riddle 14, solved as ‘horn’: the OE answer *horn* is confirmed by the masculine inflection in 6a–7b (*mec* [. . .] *beorhtne*). Riddle 20, generally solved as ‘sword’: the OE answer, the masculine noun *swēord*, is confirmed by masculine inflections in 5a (*mē widgālum*) and 13a–14a (*mec* [. . .] *rād wērigne*). Riddle 24, aptly solved as ‘magpie’ though other less plausible solutions have been proposed: the OE answer (which is not in dispute), the feminine noun *higora* / *higore*, is confirmed by the feminine adjectival inflection in 7a (*ic glado sitte*). Riddle 54, a double entendre riddle that is generally solved as ‘churn’: the OE answer, the feminine noun *cyrn*, is confirmed by the feminine pronouns or inflections in 1b (*hie*), 5a (*hyre stondendre*), 9b (*bio*), and 10b (*hyre*). Riddle 65, solved as ‘onion’: the OE answer, the feminine noun *cipe*, is confirmed by the feminine adjectival inflection in 1a (*ic cwico*). Riddle 77, solved as ‘oyster’: the OE answer, the feminine noun *ostre*, is confirmed by the feminine accusative singular inflection in 2a–3a (*mec* [. . .] *fēpelēase*). Riddle 91, solved as ‘key’: the main part of the OE answer, the feminine noun *cæg*, is confirmed by the feminine adjectival inflection in 4a–5a (*ic* [. . .] *hearde*).

¹² Muir (II, 662) calls the answer to Riddle 49 ‘uncertain’. Proposed solutions listed by that editor are falcon-cage, bookcase, oven, pen and ink, barrow/sacrificial altar, and book(?). This last solution is put forth only tentatively by Williamson, who concludes his analysis: ‘Given the uncertainties, it seems wisest to list the solution as “uncertain”, though of all the solutions, I think “book” has the greatest possibilities’ (p. 290; his riddle no. 47). If one accepts

answer that well suits the various conditions that are to be met is the doublet *hlāf ond ofen* ‘bread and oven’. Riddle 49 describes two things: (1) a large object that is ‘earthfast’, ‘deaf’, and ‘dumb’, and that receives some kind of offering that is thrust into it, and (2) the item that it receives, which (when transformed by this process) is ‘more precious than gold’ and is often desired even by people of the highest rank. The fact that the large speechless object whose identity is to be guessed is emphatically identified as masculine in gender (three times in the first three verses, for a starter) tends to confirm *hlāf ond ofen* as the solution, for OE *ofen* is a masculine noun. Of course, a person favouring a rival solution such as *bōc ond *bōc-cofa* ‘book and book-chest’ might also consider that solution confirmed.¹³ As for bread being ‘more precious than gold’, that claim will not be disputed by anyone who has heard the story of Midas; but then again, who would dispute a similar claim made on behalf of, let us say, a Gospel book (which might well be decorated with gold leaf)? Bread, gold, and the word of God: which is of truest value? Here is an instance where the importance of an Exeter Book riddle might reside in its ability to stimulate discussion among members of a textual community, as opposed to closing off debate via a single indisputable answer.

With some frequency, as the previous examples should suggest even when an exact solution is in dispute, grammatical gender can point to a more exact answer to a riddle than is usually given in the critical literature. Riddles 50 and 73 are two instances. The first of these is readily solved as ‘fire’. Its exact answer, however, is neither the concept ‘fire’ nor the OE word *fyr*, which is neuter in gender, but rather the OE masculine noun *līg* ‘fire, flame’, as can be seen from the way this element is spoken of as a raging *wiga* ‘warrior’ (1a), a masculine noun that, in the next lines, entails a series of more than half a dozen masculine pronouns and masculine adjectival inflections. If a feminine or neuter word were proposed as the solution to Riddle 50, this insistence on masculinity would seem misplaced. As for Riddle 73, its consensus solution is ‘spear’. Its more precise solution, as is evident from verses 1b–3a (*mec* [. . .] *frōdne*), is the OE noun *æsc* ‘spear (made of

Williamson’s suggested ‘book’ solution, one would still have to look for an answer such as *bōc ond *bōc-cofa* ‘book and book-chest’, for the OE noun *bōc* is of feminine gender, unlike masculine *cofa* (or its derivative form the unattested compound noun **bōc-cofa*).

¹³ See 1–2a: ‘Ic wat eardfæstne anne standan, / deafne, dumban.’ Three instances of the masculine accusative singular inflection *-ne* point to a masculine noun as the solution. Trautmann, ‘Alte und neue Antworten’, pp. 180–84, first proposed ‘oven’ (OE *bæc-ofen*) as the answer.

ash wood)', a masculine noun. The Old English answer to this riddle cannot be *spere*, for that is a neuter noun. While it could be *gār* (another name for 'spear' that is of masculine gender), that answer would entail loss of the pun by which the ash tree of lines 1–7 of this riddle becomes the ash spear that is described from then on. Other examples of riddles where grammatical gender helps point to a definite solution are Riddle 31, solved as 'bagpipes' though a plausible candidate for an exact solution is OE **blāst-pīpe* 'bagpipes', a postulated noun that has the virtue of being of female gender, as is in keeping with the feminine-gendered language of this text; Riddle 81, solved as 'weathercock' or 'weather vane' though the masculine accusative singular inflection *pyrelwombne* (11a) points to its probable OE solution, which is the masculine noun **weder-coc*; and Riddle 85, conventionally solved as 'fish and river' though a more precise answer is the OE alliterative doublet *fisc ond flōd* 'fish and river', seeing that *flōd* is a masculine noun and the body of water in which the fish swims is consistently described in terms of masculine pronouns (note *hē* in 3b, 4b, and 5b and *him* in 6a). *Fisc ond ēa* can be ruled out as the solution, for *ēa* 'river' is of feminine gender.

Although natural gender is a much less trustworthy guide than grammatical gender as an aid to riddle solving, there are a few riddles in which natural gender points to a particular solution. Riddle 38 is of interest in relation to the question of the relative weight of natural versus grammatical gender in the riddles, for its answer, OE *bulluc* 'bull calf' or 'young ox', is obviously masculine in terms of both sex and grammatical gender — indeed, we are told in 1b that the beast is *wāpnedcynnes* 'of male sex' — and yet this creature is also introduced as a *wiht* (1a), a grammatically feminine noun that is repeated in 6a (*sēo wiht*). What happens in this text is that the feminine grammatical gender of *wiht* is once reinforced (at 6a, *hīo*), while the bull calf's natural gender is twice confirmed (at 2b, *him*, and 7a, *hē*). There is a tension here between grammatical and natural gender, with natural gender taking precedence except when a pronoun is in close proximity to its antecedent.

Two other examples where natural gender points to a riddle solution are Riddles 43 and 74. The first of these is customarily solved as 'soul and body'. Its imagery encourages a solution that consists of two masculine nouns. One corresponds to the masculine *hlāford* 'lord' that is the soul (9a), while the other corresponds to the masculine *esne* 'servant' that is the body (5a, 8b, 16a). The best solution to Riddle 43, as Trautmann pointed out,¹⁴ is therefore neither the concept 'soul and body' nor the doublet *sāwel* (f.) *ond lic* (n.), but rather the doublet

¹⁴ Trautmann, 'Das Geschlecht', p. 324.

gæst ond līc-hama (two masculine nouns). As for Riddle 74, in a previous chapter I have proposed solving it as *āc ond bāt* ‘oak tree and boat’. The first of these words is grammatically feminine while the other is grammatically masculine. This answer is in keeping with the natural imagery of that poem, for the oak tree from which the boat is made is described as both a *fæmne geong* ‘young woman’ and a *cwene* ‘adult woman’, while the ship itself is described in heroic terms as a *rinc* ‘warrior’.¹⁵

Grammatical gender is a very special category, however, as is cryptographic wordplay. The number of Exeter Book riddles in which those two factors play a significant role (twenty-nine, by my count) is less than a third of the total number of riddles in the collection (ninety-four, according to my count, with the understanding that two folios in this section of the manuscript seem to have gone missing, so that the total number may once have been very close to one hundred). In order to support my comprehensive claim about the importance of answering the riddles in their own tongue, I will make a number of additional suggestions regarding the merits of refusing to consider an Old English riddle ‘solved’ until one arrives not just at a *thing* that satisfies all the requisite conditions, but also a *word that designates that thing* in the vocabulary that was current in Anglo-Saxon England during the general period when the Exeter Book poems were compiled and written down. As will be shown, there is much to be gained by approaching the riddles as much as possible as a person living in Anglo-Saxon England might have done. The problem is not just that failure to observe that principle has led to more than one apt answer to a riddle being overlooked and more than one pun falling on deaf ears. Just as importantly, opportunities relating to social history and cognitive anthropology may have been lost; for when one sets out to solve the riddles in their own tongue, basic elements of the Anglo-Saxon material and conceptual worlds stand out with greater clarity than they would otherwise do. The Exeter Book riddles fall into the general category of wisdom literature, and the full benefits of that class of literature are only revealed when nomenclature is given due respect. As Nicholas Howe has reminded us, ‘Many of the Old English riddles found in the Exeter Book are expressed in the first-person and conclude with this challenge to the reader: “Say

¹⁵ For that solution see chapter 1, ‘Exeter Book Riddle 74 and the Play of the Text’, at pp. 31–43. The feminine-gendered oak tree, when young, is a slender sapling; when mature (as a *feax-hār cwene* ‘hoary-headed woman’) it provides timber for the shipwright. The masculine-gendered boat is seen first ploughing the waves like a heroic warrior (OE *rinc* ‘man’, ‘warrior’) and then being beached on the shore.

what I am called" (*Saga hwæt ic hatte*).¹⁶ My aim throughout this chapter is to respond quite literally to that challenge.

When Is a Swan Not a Swan? Riddles 7, 69, 86, and Others

'A swan is a swan is a swan', any person endowed with common sense might be tempted to remark while contemplating the answer to Riddle 7 (*Hrægl min swigað*), one of the short poems of the Exeter Book that is especially admired. Here is an instance where the appeal of the riddle would seem to reside almost wholly in the ornamental language in which it is posed, not in its solution, for its answer, 'wild swan', is scarcely in dispute. Moreover, the answer to this riddle in modern English seems no better or worse than its answer in Old English, which is the noun *swān*. But *is* a swan a swan? Granted, the wild swans that swim the waters of Northern Europe may have changed very little in physical appearance during the past thousand years, if indeed they have changed at all. The literary and typological swan that is the precise answer to Exeter Book Riddle 7, however, is not the same as any of its real-life counterparts. Unlike any natural fowl, this creature has feathers that literally make music when it flies. When it takes to the air, as we are told in lines 6b–8a of its first-person address, 'Frætwe mine / swogað hlude ond swinsiað, / torhte singað' (my accoutrements resound and make music, they sing out with a clear sound). The allusion here, I take it, is neither to any metaphorical 'music' that a bird's feathers make in flight, nor to the rushing sound made by a swan's wings, though that association is not implausible here.¹⁷ Rather, the poet seems to be alluding to the medieval idea, repeated in learned circles and anchored in the system of Christian typology, that there is a special type of wild swan whose wings make actual tuneful music when it flies.¹⁸

¹⁶ Nicholas Howe, 'The Cultural Construction of Reading in Anglo-Saxon England', in *The Ethnography of Reading*, ed. by Jonathan Boyarin (Berkeley, 1993), pp. 58–79 (p. 64). This aspect of the riddles has recently been highlighted by Jonathan Wilcox, "'Tell Me What I Am': The Old English Riddles", in *Readings in Medieval Texts: Interpreting Old and Middle English Literature*, ed. by David F. Johnson and Elaine Treharne (Oxford, 2005), pp. 46–59.

¹⁷ Peter Kitson, 'Swans and Geese in Old English Riddles', *ASSAH*, 7 (1994), 79–84, offers as the precise answer to Riddle 7 the solution 'mute swan' (*Cygnus olor*) on the basis of 'the characteristic musical throbbing noise produced by the flight-feathers' of this species (p. 79). This is the most persuasive of the naturalistic solutions that have been proposed.

¹⁸ See Williamson, pp. 151–52 (his riddle number 5), for an account of this arcane idea, which is articulated in the fourth-century *Epistles* of Gregorius Nazianzenus. It is possible, of

So in this regard the music made by the swan of Riddle 7, with its reminiscence of the ascending Christ, does not resemble the 'music' made by the wings of any bird to be seen in today's waterways or skies. A swan is therefore a swan except when it is the answer to an Exeter Book riddle.

A similar observation holds true of other aspects of the natural or material world that is invoked in Old English poetry. While (to take another example) no one would be so foolish as to deny that a horse is a horse, few people who are familiar with the natural history of that animal are likely to accept without qualification the statement that an Anglo-Saxon *hors* was the same as its modern counterpart. On the contrary, horses of that earlier era were a few hands shorter than ordinary horses are today. In size and physique they are thought to have resembled a breed of ponies still found in Iceland, an Atlantic outpost to which the Norsemen brought those animals hobbled in the holds of ships.¹⁹ So a horse is a horse is not a horse. In a similar manner, an Anglo-Saxon *tūn* 'fortified enclosure' bore almost no resemblance to a modern town; a Viking Age clinker-built *scip* 'ship' could never be mistaken for one of the great steel vessels that plow the ocean today; and the *bēor* 'beer' that the Angles and Saxons drank could not have tasted at all like the pints of beer served up in English pubs today, even to the point where our word 'beer' is a misnomer for that earlier brew.²⁰ These are among the many 'false friends' with which the treasure-house of etymology is crammed. Furthermore, many words that were current during the Anglo-Saxon era have passed out of use in subsequent centuries, sometimes to be supplanted by equivalent terms and sometimes not. So care must be taken when one poses an answer to an Old English riddle in present-day terms. The things that we name in our own tongue may not have existed in Anglo-Saxon England in quite the same form or with the same name, and when we turn to the riddles, those differences can make a difference.

Granted, some of these distinctions of nomenclature may mean little in the grand scheme of things. Riddle 22, for example, which has been solved as 'waggon of stars', must have had a different answer a thousand years ago, when the item in question (the constellation Ursa Major, alias 'The Plough' or 'The

course, that a riddler's observation of actual birds has fused with an element of bookish learning, thus leading to the heightened language of Riddle 7.

¹⁹ See Sarah Larratt Keefer, 'Hwær Cwom Mearh? The Horse in Anglo-Saxon England', *Journal of Medieval History*, 22 (1996), 115–34. Information on the Icelandic pony is given in her Appendix C (pp. 133–34).

²⁰ Christine E. Fell, 'Old English *Beor*', *Leeds Studies in English*, n.s., 8 (1975), 76–95.

Big Dipper') was known by the name *Carles wæn* 'Charles's wain'.²¹ *Carles wæn* is therefore a felicitous answer to the riddle, though it must be granted that acknowledgment of that fact yields only minor pleasure. There are other instances, as well, in which the grounds for preferring a solution posed in Old English over one posed in current English lie chiefly in the realm of aesthetics or taste. If one happens to prefer the solution *blāst-belg* 'wind bag' over modern English 'bellows' as the answer to Riddles 37 and 87, for example (as I do), there may be little reason for that preference other than a sense that the older word is more vigorous. If one prefers the solution *bulluc* 'bullock' over modern English 'young ox' as the answer to Riddle 38, then that may be only because the older word is attractively blunt. For similar reasons, I favour *hūsel-disc* as an apt solution for Riddle 48 and *hūsel-fet* for Riddle 59. Alternatively, the Latin terms *paten* and *calyx*, respectively, are equally good answers. Either the Latin or the vernacular terms ought to be found preferable to the less vivid modern answers 'Eucharistic vessel' for Riddle 48 and 'chalice', with its inapposite Arthurian associations, for Riddle 59. If I happen to favour the Old English names for these things over their Latin counterparts, that is because they more solidly call up to my layman's mind the material presence of the Eucharist in the form of the 'housel', in the unadorned English of John Foxe's day, but that is largely a matter of taste. Other readers may have a different response.

Another example of a riddle that is worth trying to answer in its own tongue is Riddle 69. As edited by Krapp and Dobbie (correctly, in my opinion),²² this is one of the most elegant riddles in the collection, for it consists of a single line:

Wundor wearð on wege; wæter wearð to bane.

(Along the path a miracle: water turned to bone.)

²¹ As is noted by L. Blakeley, 'Riddles 22 and 58 of the Exeter Book', *Review of English Studies*, n.s., 9 (1958), 241–52 (at p. 243), Ælfric in his treatise *De Temporibus Anni* (ed. Heinrich Henel (Oxford, 1942), p. 68) identifies the vernacular name of this constellation as *Carles wæn*. An alternative name for that same constellation, *Wānes þisla* 'The Waggon's Shafts', occurs in Meter 28, line 10 of *The Meters of Boethius*.

²² Williamson (p. 106) edits the text differently, taking this line to be the conclusion of a three-line riddle whose solution is 'iceberg'. One reason why I prefer a different approach is that there is no word for 'iceberg' in the OE lexicon, as far as the extant records go, as is only to be expected seeing that icebergs would not have been a common sight in England in the first millennium AD any more than they are today. The fundamental strategy of riddling is to describe commonplace things in exotic terms, not the reverse.

The accepted answer, of course, is 'ice'. But still, what Old English word or phrase would represent an apt period-specific solution? The commonsensical answer to that question is the noun *īs*, the etymon of modern English 'ice'. I will offer an alternative suggestion, however, one that takes full account of the phrase *on wege* 'on the path'.²³ Evidently, when reading Riddle 69, what we are to imagine is that someone walking out along a path has encountered a strange sight (a *wundor*) whose name provides the answer to the riddle. What that item is, I suggest, is not simply 'ice' in the abstract (nor is it likely to be Williamson's 'iceberg') but rather a frozen puddle or pool. After all, most people living in Anglo-Saxon England lived their lives in accord with the rhythms of a village-based agrarian economy. It is safe to assume that the people of that era routinely walked out among their fields whether in summer or winter. What they would commonly have come upon in the dead of winter was ice in the form of frozen ponds, puddles, and ditches. So an answer to Riddle 69 that aptly satisfies all its conditions, path and all, is *īs-mere* 'frozen pool'. After all, a felicitous answer to an Exeter Book riddle should not only be technically 'correct'; it should also be consistent with the material conditions of life during that earlier era, and it will promote understanding of those conditions, as well. Although I do not pretend that much hangs upon my proposed variation on the generally accepted solution to this riddle, the answer *īs-mere* is consistent with the world view of people who, it is safe to assume, knew their natural surroundings well.

To round off this part of my discussion, another riddle that, on cultural and aesthetic grounds, might better be answered in Old English than in the English of the present day is Riddle 86, 'one-eyed seller of garlic'. While there is nothing wrong with that droll solution, an answer that might yet be preferred is the OE phrase *ān-ēagde gār-lēac monger*. Like *Carles wæn*, that phrase has a claim to cultural authenticity that the modern phrase lacks, for even though 'a seller of garlic' is not likely to be found in modern markets, a *gār-lēac monger* might well have frequented the roads and marketplaces of Anglo-Saxon England.

Aesthetics and 'cultural correctness' are far from all that is at stake when it comes to providing adequate answers to the riddles, however. The remainder of this chapter will be devoted to discussion of riddles that cannot be considered properly solved until they are answered in their own tongue.

²³ *On wege* is the manuscript reading, and I take this phrase in its obvious sense, with the understanding that someone is imagined to be walking on a path and looking about as he (or she) goes. An alternative is to construe the phrase as equal to *on wāge* 'in (or on) the wave or water', and indeed a play on words between *weg* 'path' and *wæg* 'water' may be intended.

The Heuristic Value of Words: Riddles 28, 26, and 47

Riddle 28 serves as a good example of how the process of searching for the right words in which to frame the answer to a riddle can have heuristic value, for it can affect one's choice of a solution. Williamson's solution, 'yew horn?', which he advances at some length although in the end only tentatively,²⁴ does indeed seem doubtful given the manner in which the item to be guessed is described. Nor is there much reason to opt for a solution that is often proposed, 'John Barleycorn', for in modern Scotland what that nickname denotes is malt whisky, a drink that was unknown in Anglo-Saxon England.²⁵ What this exuberant riddle is about, quite specifically, is the making and consumption of ale; and a precise solution for it, I suggest, is the OE doublet *bere ond ealu* 'barley and ale'.²⁶ The felicity of that solution ought to be apparent when the text is presented in its entirety. This is something worth doing in any event, for the last six and a half lines are easily misunderstood:

Biþ foldan dæl fægre gegierwed
 mid þy heardestan ond mid þy scearpestan
 ond mid þy grymmostan gumena gestreona,
 corfen, sworfen, cyrred, þyrred,
 5 bunden, wunden, blæced, wæced,
 frætwed, geatwed, feorran læded
 to durum dryhta. Dream bið in innan
 cwicra wihta, clengeð, lengeð,
 þara þe ær lifgende longe hwile

²⁴ Williamson, pp. 218–24 (his riddle no. 26). Muir regards the answer to this riddle as 'uncertain' and cites the following proposed solutions: John Barleycorn, beer or ale, wine cask, harp, a stringed instrument, tortoise-shell lyre, malt liquor, barrow or trial of the soul, yew-horn, parchment, and damascened sword. Obviously this riddle has occasioned major disagreement in the critical literature.

²⁵ When the Scottish poet Robert Burns wrote his spirited ode in praise of 'John Barleycorn', what he was celebrating was malt whisky, that distillation of Scottish national identity. English broadside ballads of the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries that go by that same title celebrate ale. The nickname is thus an ambiguous one. Tupper, pp. 135–36, accepts 'beer or ale' as the solution and offers a learned discussion of the early medieval craft of brewing, plus a note on the 'John Barleycorn' ballad.

²⁶ Except for its precise wording, this is not a new solution, for various readers have perceived that what the riddler is describing is the production of beer or ale. Paull F. Baum's solution 'malt liquor', offered in his book of translations *Anglo-Saxon Riddles of the Exeter Book* (Durham, NC, 1963), p. 48, comes closest to the answer I propose.

10 wilna bruceð ond no wið spriced,
 ond þonne æfter deape deman onginneð,
 meldan mislice. Micel is to hycganne
 wisfæstum menn, hwæt seo wiht sy.

(A region of earth [or, a portion of arable land] is beautifully adorned with the hardest and sharpest and fiercest of the treasures of humankind. It is cut, scoured, turned, dried, bound up, rolled, bleached, deprived of its strength, made fully ready, and brought from afar to the doors of the companies of men. There is joy within it — joy that clings, that lasts — for anyone who partakes of these pleasures for a long while when alive, never speaking a word against it. Then after death, people begin to assess it in a different manner, speaking of its faults.²⁷ It is a big task for anyone, no matter how wise, to guess what *this* creature is!)

The speaker's closing bluff is best taken as comic irony, for the challenge posed by this riddle is not nearly as difficult as may seem. What else but *ealu* 'ale' is brought from the fields into the houses of men, there to be consumed with pleasure, even though anyone who overindulges in alcoholic beverages is likely to regret that fact when called to Judgement?

In the riddle's first three lines, allusion is made to the ripe barley as it stands upright in the field,²⁸ each head armed with a phalanx of tiny spears, a 'fierce' sight (in a playful allusion to its spiked appearance) but a beautiful one for the farmer. The barley is then cut and malted, and reference is made to the process by which it is harvested, then dried, threshed, and turned, then soaked and allowed to germinate before being fermented in the malting house (OE *mealt-hūs*). Once brewed into good fresh ale, it is brought out to everyone's delight. This whole action, which is presented in some of the most vigorous rhymed poetry to be found in Old English, is seen from the point of view of the personified barley, for whom it is all a rather fraught affair.

Here is an instance where searching for the right words in which to frame an answer helps lead one to the right material solution, for what is described is the process by which ale is brewed out of its chief ingredient, barley, the primeval crop of Eurasia and, thanks to the brewmaster's skills, one of the great 'treasures'

²⁷ The OE noun *melda* can denote not just an announcer, but an informer or betrayer (B-T, s.v. *melda*). The verb *meldan*, in this context, is thus likely to mean not just 'to speak' (as in B-T, s.v. *meldan*) but 'to speak against', 'to reveal the faults of'. As for the verb *dēman*, I take it in DOE sense II.B: 'to discern, assess or appraise'.

²⁸ See the DOE, s.v. *folde*, sense 1.d: 'the earth / ground as productive or suited for cultivation; soil, arable land'.

of the field still today.²⁹ Part of the appeal of this solution to Riddle 28 is that the activity that is described here in such a vigorously allusive manner would have been a familiar domestic one, as Judith M. Bennet has pointed out in an article that, though written with later medieval England chiefly in mind, is not without relevance to the understanding of this text:³⁰

[Brewing] was essential because ale, although certainly imbibed for its inebriating effects, was also a fundamental part of the medieval diet. It was widely practiced because ale was both readily made and highly perishable. Even modest peasant households possessed the utensils required to brew (pots, vats, ladles, straining cloths), and most women learned to brew as part of their domestic routine.

As in so many other instances, the delight that an original audience would have experienced when deciphering Riddle 28 would have come in part from the shock of discovering that what is so cleverly disguised was a familiar part of their lifeworld.

As for the last three lines of the riddle, I believe that they are meant to serve as a reminder of the dangers of overindulgence in drink. Paull F. Baum may be missing the point of lines 11–12a when he translates them ‘But after the death they start talking big, chattering chittering’, and then explicates those lines as follows: ‘This seems to mean that those who drink are happy and feel alive for a time; then they are overtaken, dead to themselves, and talk recklessly.’³¹ Such an explanation needlessly secularizes the poet’s point while at the same time blunting the force of the phrase *þonne æfter dēape* by interpreting it as no more than an allusion to a drunken stupor. If the allusion to death in these lines is literal rather than metaphorical, then this passage opens up the poem to reflections about eschatology and spiritual discipline. What the lines allude to, I suspect, is the regret of souls who, when facing a dreadful accounting for their sins while on earth, have second thoughts about the wisdom of their having succumbed to bouts of overindulgence and drunkenness. They will then begin to

²⁹ Ann Hagen, *A Second Handbook of Anglo-Saxon Food and Drink Production and Distribution* (Hackwold cum Wilton, Norfolk, 1995), pp. 21–23, provides information about the relative distribution of barley and wheat in Britain in Anglo-Saxon times. In brief, the cultivation of both crops was widespread. Wheat, where available (chiefly in the south), was preferred for the production of bread. Barley, which was hardy enough to be cultivated almost anywhere, was used chiefly for brewing, sometimes for bread, and perhaps also in soups and stews and for feeding stock.

³⁰ Judith M. Bennett, ‘Brewing’, in *Medieval England*, p. 144.

³¹ *Anglo-Saxon Riddles*, trans. by Baum, pp. 48–49.

speak in a different manner (*meldan mislice*, 12a) about their former life of indulgence. Worth noting in this connection is that lines 6b–17 of Riddle 27 too, the ‘mead’ riddle, offer an extended (though humorous) warning against the sad effects of binge drinking, which leaves toppers lying senseless on their backs. In a more strongly moralistic statement of this theme, Riddle 11, the ‘wine’ riddle, consists almost exclusively of an excoriation of alcohol and drunkenness. Such an attitude regarding the dangers of excessive drinking is typical of the devotional literature of this era. As Hugh Magennis has emphasized, ‘the overwhelming message of the literature of Christian teaching is to do with controlling and regulating earthly appetites, of which excess in eating and drinking was regarded as a particularly dangerous manifestation’.³² In keeping with the spirit of these other riddles about alcoholic beverages (and also in keeping with the generally sober spirit of the Exeter Book as a whole), Riddle 28 evokes the consumption of ale as a pleasure that, like any bodily delight, can also represent a spiritual hazard.

Analysis of two examples of what Laurence K. Shook has called ‘riddles of the scriptorium’,³³ Riddle 26 and Riddle 47, will lend support to my argument regarding the importance of phrasing the answers to the riddles in the language of the riddler. Each of these two riddles has been thought to have been solved satisfactorily, the first as ‘Bible’ and the other as ‘bookworm’. While those consensus solutions are acceptable as approximations, more precise answers can be found.

Riddle 26 begins as follows. I will quote only the first third of this extended tour de force, in which the process of book-making is seen from the perspective of the physical parchment of which the codex is made:

Mec feonda sum feore besnyþede,
woruldstrenga binom, wætte sipþan,
dyfde on wætre, dyde eft þonan,

³² Hugh Magennis, *Anglo-Saxon Appetites: Food and Drink and their Consumption in Old English and Related Literature* (Dublin, 1999), p. 16. Magennis notes that for St Jerome, *ebrietas* has a central place among the vices for it overthrows reason in the mind (p. 103). For Ælfric, similarly, drunkenness leads to other sins because an inebriated person does not know what he or she is doing for *his feond-licum drencum* ‘on account of his fiendish drinking-bouts’ (p. 104, quoting a phrase that appears twice in Ælfric’s works).

³³ Laurence K. Shook, ‘Riddles Relating to the Anglo-Saxon Scriptorium’, in *Essays in Honour of Anton Charles Pegis*, ed. by J. Reginald O’Donnell (Toronto, 1974), pp. 215–36. Shook makes a concerted effort to answer these riddles in their own tongue, offering such solutions as *hālig gewrit* for Riddle 26, *gewritere ond gewrit* ‘scribe and writing’ for Riddle 19, *penn ond atrum* ‘pen and ink’ for Riddle 49, and *fēder or penna* ‘pen’ for Riddle 57.

sette on sunnan, þær ic swiþe beleas
 5 herum þam þe ic hæfde. Heard mec sipþan
 snað seaxes ecg, sindrum begrunden;
 fingras feoldan, ond mec fugles wyn
 geond speddropum spyrede geneahe,
 ofer brunne brerd, beamtelge swealg. [. . .]

(An enemy deprived me of my life, stripped away my earthly strength, then soaked me, immersed me in liquid. He took me out again and set me in the sun, where I was stripped of all the hairs I had. The hard edge of a knife then sliced me, once I had been smoothed with a scourer.³⁴ Fingers folded me, and the joy of the bird made frequent tracks on me with its fortunate drops. Over the broad rim it swallowed up the wood-dye. [. . .])

The references to the production of the parchment of a book from the hide of a living animal are so clear as to be unmistakable. The poet first alludes to the slaughter of a beast, then to the tanning of its hide, the removal of its hairs, the polishing and cutting of the surface, the folding of the page, and the actual writing of words on the page, as a scribe dips into an inkwell to refill his quill pen with ink made from oak gall and other ingredients. Moreover, the lines that immediately follow this description reveal what type of book this is, for they allude to its gold ornamentation and speak of it as a source of edification. What is described, therefore, is a devotional book, and the riddle has naturally been solved as ‘Bible’ or, with greater precision and with due attention to the Old English lexicon, as *hālig gewrit* ‘Holy Scripture’.³⁵

While either of those answers might be thought adequate, neither seems to me to express the poet’s intention precisely. As Richard Marsden notes, ‘com-

³⁴ The literal meaning of *sindrum begrunden* (6b) seems to be ‘ground down with pieces of slag’. Williamson translates verse 6b as ‘with all impurities ground off’ and interprets that phrase with reference to the knife mentioned in the preceding verse rather than to the speaking subject of the riddle. For my own part, I suspect that the allusion is to the smoothing of the tanned hide using an abrasive tool. Although slag, the roughly textured leavings of the process of smelting, could conceivably be used for that purpose (and Shook, ‘Riddles Relating to the Anglo-Saxon Scriptorium’, p. 220, correspondingly translates verse 6b ‘polished with slag’), the word *sindrum* is perhaps used metaphorically to refer to some other abrasive substance, perhaps pumice, the finely textured volcanic stone that was used to smooth the parchment in the last stages before writing. For a succinct and informative account of the process by which parchment was prepared for use as a writing surface, see Christopher de Hamel, *Medieval Craftsmen: Scribes and Illuminators* (Toronto, 1992), pp. 8–26, with a note on pumice on p. 37.

³⁵ This latter solution has been proposed by Shook, ‘Riddles Relating to the Anglo-Saxon Scriptorium’, pp. 219–20.

plete Bibles were a rarity in Anglo-Saxon England'.³⁶ What the monastic houses of this era did make, sometimes with astonishing skill, were illuminated Gospel books. The most lavish of these, such as the Lindisfarne Gospels, the Book of Kells, and the Codex Aureus, date from the Age of Bede, the golden age of Northumbrian book production. The Anglo-Saxons also made handsomely illuminated psalters and benedictionals, chiefly during and after the tenth-century Benedictine Reform, but these were generally a less ostentatious production. If today we call to mind an image of an illuminated manuscript from the Anglo-Saxon period, what we are likely to be thinking of is a copy of the Gospels, and that is probably what the poet and the members of his audience had in mind as well. The best answer to Riddle 24, I therefore suggest, is *Cristes bōc* 'a Gospel book'. As for the possibility that the book is a psalter, it need not be ruled out; but since the poet speaks of gold and other ornamentation but makes no mention of songs (while the psalms are the quintessential example of sung poetry and were less likely to be illuminated with gold leaf), the more apt solution is *Cristes bōc*. So a Bible is a Bible, except when it is an Anglo-Saxon Gospel book.³⁷

Riddle 47 has been reprinted so often that one might assume that it had been solved to everyone's satisfaction by now. Indeed, the statement has several times been made that this riddle names its own solution, 'bookworm', so that any nuancing of that answer would seem to be superfluous.³⁸ While Riddle 47

³⁶ Richard Marsden, in *Blackwell Encyclopaedia*, s.v. 'Bible', at p. 65, col. 1.

³⁷ *Anglo-Saxon Poetry*, ed. and trans. by S. A. J. Bradley (London, 1982), p. 374, cites 'Gospel-book' as the solution, using the modern English term. He does not try to justify that choice.

³⁸ Tupper states that 'the answer is betrayed at the outset' (p. xl). Similarly, Bruce Mitchell and Fred C. Robinson, *A Guide to Old English*, 6th edn (Oxford, 2001), declare that 'the first word identifies the subject of the poem' (p. 233). In his earlier essay 'Artful Ambiguities in the Old English "Book-Moth" Riddle', in *Anglo-Saxon Poetry: Essays in Appreciation for John C. McGalliard*, ed. by Lewis E. Nicholson and Dolores Warwick Frese (South Bend, IN, 1975), pp. 355–62, Robinson states that the answer to Riddle 47 appears to be 'embarrassingly unproblematic' since the poet begins with 'a literal statement of his subject' (pp. 356–57). He goes on to show, however, that the riddle contains artful complexities based on a series of puns. Geoffrey Russom, 'Exeter Riddle 47: A Moth Laid Waste to Fame', *PQ*, 56 (1977), 129–36 (at p. 136, n. 15) takes issue with the claim that the riddle names its own solution, pointing out that the word *moppe* does not refer to a bookworm. Elsewhere in this study Russom emphasizes that nowhere does the riddler state that what is eaten is a book or any piece of writing. The OE terms *word*, *gied(d)*, and *cwide* (used to refer to what the creature devours) normally refer to speech or song, not to the written word. The riddle is thus based on a fundamental paradox, the idea that spoken words can be eaten.

obviously speaks of a book that has been damaged by some burrowing insect, close inspection of the text will lead to a somewhat different solution than the one that is commonly accepted.

Moððe word fræt. Me þæt þuhte
 wrætlicu wyrd, þa ic þæt wundor gefrægn,
 þæt se wyrm forswealg wera gied sumes,
 þeof in þystro, þrymfæstne cwide
 5 ond þæs strangan stapol. Stælgæst ne wæs
 wihte þy gleawra, þe he þam wordum swealg.

(A moth devoured words.³⁹ When I learned of that wonder it seemed to me a marvellous thing, that a worm — a thief in the dark — had swallowed up the song of a certain man, a glorious utterance, the foundation of the strong. That thieving guest was not a whit wiser for having swallowed up those words.)

As with most of the riddles, the first thing to be done if one wishes to pinpoint the solution to this puzzle is to work through its system of metaphorical language. The creature whose name is to be guessed is first called a *moððe* ‘moth’, a flying insect. Later it is called a *wyrm*, a ‘worm’ or ‘serpent’. The item to be guessed thus not only has power of flight; it also is a burrowing creature.⁴⁰ Since what the creature does (as all readers agree) is to devour the parchment of a manuscript, then what it must be is a maggot. This unsavoury creature, which has fittingly been described as a kind of primitive eating machine, is seen in two separate stages of its life cycle, here temporally reversed. We first see it in its adult form as a *moððe*. This word must be taken metaphorically, for a moth, though it has a larval form, does not grow out of a flesh-eating grub as does (for example) a horse fly, which is the adult form of one fairly common flesh-eating maggot. We are then told in greater detail of this creature’s existence in its larval stage, when it was equipped by nature to eat its way through the organic tissue in which it had been deposited when in the form of an egg. If this line of reasoning is accepted, then the creature whose name is to be guessed is not a

³⁹ Given dative plural *wordum* in verse 6b, it is natural to construe *word* in the plural in verse 1a. This is not a trivial point. Indeed, Russom could scarcely advance the claim that *word* in this riddle signifies ‘fame, name, (good) word, (good) report’ if he were to translate that word in the plural.

⁴⁰ Since a *wyrm* of this type is a flying creature, the possibility could be entertained that a dragon is meant. Considerations of context would seem to rule out that solution, however.

‘bookworm’ — a modern word that has no OE equivalent of which I am aware — but rather a *maða*, a common OE noun denoting ‘maggot’ or ‘grub’.⁴¹

If this line of reasoning is accepted, *maða* is still only half the answer to Riddle 47. Another question should be addressed that, as far as I know, has not been raised in the critical literature. What is the book that this surreptitious creature has been eating?

We are given two hints as to the answer, just enough to form the basis of an educated guess. First of all, the book contains a *gied* ‘song’ of some kind, for that is what the grub devours, ‘a certain man’s song’ and not just any letters or words. Second, this same song is characterized as ‘a glorious utterance’ (or, if one prefers, ‘a glorious piece of writing’). Moreover, it is ‘the foundation of the strong’, if I read verse 5a aright.⁴² The one book that, in the Anglo-Saxon period, would have fulfilled those conditions most obviously is the psalter. As George Hardin Brown and other specialists in Anglo-Saxon monastic education have pointed out, no book used in the education of the clerical elite was more important than the psalter.⁴³ Moreover, the psalms were not thought to be of anonymous authorship. Their composition was attributed to the *sealm-wirhta* ‘psalmist’ King David, who indeed by virtue of that fact was regarded as the archetypal poet after whom later poets (such as King Alfred, the translator of some of the psalms) could in part model themselves. So the man who is referred to in verse 3b and whose words are devoured is King David. The book that is affected by this misfortune is a psalter, a material artefact containing words whose origins lay in the realm of divinely inspired speech and song. Much of the wit of this riddle resides in its juxtaposition of two things of such asymmetrical value, the sacred word and a devouring grub, as well as in its contrast of orality and the material

⁴¹ As A. N. Doane has brought to my attention, the resemblance of the word *maða* to *mōððe* allows for a ‘near-pun’ that enhances the validity of this approach. While I am happy to accept that suggestion, one should keep in mind that these two words resemble one another more closely in visual appearance than in phonology.

⁴² Taking issue with some other readers (including Russom, ‘Exeter Riddle 47’, p. 131 and p. 132; also Muir, II, 647), I am confident that the words that are swallowed are ‘the strong man’s firm support’ (that is, ‘the strong person’s support’ regardless of gender). I take *strangan* (verse 5a), together with the genitive article *þæs* that precedes it, as a weak noun (formed from the adjective) in the genitive singular case, not as an adjective in the accusative singular case as other translators would have it (though not B-T, s.v. *stapol*).

⁴³ On the psalter see chapter 5 below, p. 168 and note 54.

book.⁴⁴ Like all worldly things, the ‘body’ of the psalms — that is, the physical book in which they are written — may be subject to physical corruption, but the divinely inspired words of scripture remain, voiced aloud as part of the daily office, thereby transcending the parchment on which they are written. As for the lowly grub, it is none the wiser even after its meal.

To return to our starting point a short while ago, Riddle 47 can scarcely be said to name its own answer. Its full and correct solution is the OE phrase *maða ond sealm-bōc* ‘maggot and psalter’, yet another doublet.

Some More Alliterative Doublets: Riddles 11, 44, 85, 12, 14, and 51

As should be apparent by now, a special kind of felicity is achieved when the answer to an Exeter Book riddle takes the form of a well-matched doublet.⁴⁵ The exact solution to such a riddle naturally consists of a pair of words rather than a single one. Examples that have been identified in previous pages are Riddles 28 *bere ond ealu*, 47 *maða ond sealm-bōc*, 49 *hlāf ond ofen*, 54 *cyrn ond butere*, 74 *āc ond bāt*, and 75/76 *hund ond hīnd*. Two other examples of this kind are Riddles 15 and 29. The first of these describes a swift, fierce animal with prominent ears. It guards its young in a den, but sometimes it is forced to flee its home with its young when attacked by a second fierce creature. The answer to this riddle is readily construed as ‘fox’ (though as with most of the riddles, other creatures of the animal kingdom have been entertained as possible solutions), and I suggest that the precise solution is the doublet *fox ond hund* ‘fox and hound’. As for Riddle 29, it describes one marvellous *wiht* ‘creature’ that puts a second bright

⁴⁴ Indeed, the paradox dwelt upon here is a familiar one even within the manuscript context of the Exeter Book. In the poem known as ‘Soul and Body II’, written out on folios 98a–100a (Krapp and Dobbie, pp. 174–78), the dead flesh that is now food for maggots (*wyrma gifl* 22b; *wyrmum to wiste* 117a; *wyrmes giefl*, 119b) is berated by the deathless soul, which is now subject to torments in hell on account of the person’s sins.

⁴⁵ Mercedes Salvador, ‘The Key to the Body: Unlocking Riddles 42–46’, in *Naked Before God: Uncovering the Body in Anglo-Saxon England*, ed. by Benjamin C. Withers and Jonathan Wilcox (Morgantown, WV, 2003), pp. 60–96 (at pp. 94–96) discusses a series of five Exeter Book riddles in succession (numbers 42–46) which, in her view, call for binary solutions. In the course of a wide-ranging article that is as yet unpublished, ‘Latin Tradition and Benedictine Context in the Exeter Riddles’, Salvador conveniently lists all the solutions to Anglo-Latin riddles, including a number of binary solutions to the riddles of Eusebius, who favoured this device in eight out of sixty instances. I am grateful to Dr Salvador for having let me read this article in advance of publication.

wiht to flight. The answer to this puzzle is readily construed as *mōna ond sunne* ‘moon and sun’, with the understanding that it is the rising sun that banishes the moon from the daytime sky.

Doublets like ‘sun and moon’ are found not only in English idiom but in many other languages as well, sometimes in alliterative form. One familiar example is the OE phrase *wordum ond weorcum* ‘by words and deeds’, which occurs over a dozen times in the poetry of this period in one or another spelling or inflectional form.⁴⁶ Other examples of sturdy doublets are our current phrases ‘might and main’ (where the second element derives from OE *māgen* ‘power’) and ‘to have and to hold’ (a legal formula that serves as the equivalent of the OE verb *habban*, which by itself can denote ownership).

As has been noted above, one riddle of the Exeter Book that has an alliterative doublet as its solution is Riddle 42, *hana ond hæn*. Although this riddle is routinely solved as ‘cock and hen’, only when the solution is posed in Old English is the alliteration preserved that contributes to the felicity of the answer. Another riddle whose most felicitous answer is an alliterative doublet is Riddle 11. This is commonly solved as either ‘wine’ or ‘cup or beaker of wine’ (for what is described here is not just the liquid but its container as well); but a period-specific answer that might be preferred is the alliterative doublet *wīn ond wīn-fæt* ‘wine and wine cup’. Yet another riddle whose answer is an alliterative pair is Riddle 44, for which I offer the solution *cæg ond cluster* ‘key and lock’ as preferable to the conventional modern English solution ‘key’.⁴⁷ Since this double entendre riddle makes prominent reference both to a hard object that hangs by a man’s thigh and a ‘familiar hole’ of equal length into which the object is often put (*þæt cūpe hōl*, 5b), an ideal solution would refer to both the male and the female partners in a coupling. The alliterative doublet *cæg ond cluster* is a judicious answer on the innocent side. Similar to this example is Riddle 56, traditionally solved as ‘loom’ but, I suggest, better solved as the OE doublet *webb ond web-bēam* ‘web and web-beam’ (or, more fluently, ‘fabric and loom’). Since prominent mention is made of the product that results from the weaver’s labour, both as it hangs on

⁴⁶ Paul Acker, *Revising Oral Theory: Formulaic Composition in Old English and Old Icelandic Verse* (New York, 1998), pp. 3–33, discusses the use of alliterative doublets, particularly in *Beowulf*, in the course of discussion of what he calls ‘syndetic formulas’. He uses that term to refer to two terms, always the same part of speech, that are conjoined in one half-line, usually by *ond*, and that usually are joined by alliteration though sometimes by rhyme (p. 4).

⁴⁷ Here as elsewhere, I am only concerned with the innocent answer to a double entendre riddle.

the loom (9–10a) and as it is brought out into the hall ‘where heroes were at their drink’ (11b), the cloth or tapestry should be part of the answer.

One clear example of a riddle whose answer is an alliterative doublet is Riddle 85, which describes a swift creature that lives in the midst of something else whose nature is to be guessed. A broad hint as to its identity is given: it will die if separated from this union. An apt answer is *fisc ond flōd* ‘fish and stream’ (or, if one prefer, ‘fish and sea’). Some readers may prefer the more edifying solution ‘soul and body’, but an impediment to that approach is the fact that rivers and seas never cease from movement, whereas a body sometimes sleeps (see line 5, *Hwilum ic me reste; he sceal yrnan forð* ‘sometimes I [the fish] rest, but it [the body of water] remains in constant motion’). Another reason for preferring the solution ‘fish and stream’ pertains to grammatical gender, as we have seen: the second member of this symbiotic relationship is four times referred to by the masculine pronoun *hē*, and OE *flōd* is a masculine noun.⁴⁸

Riddle 12, traditionally solved as ‘ox’ or ‘leather,’ is also best solved as a doublet. This riddle describes a creature that cuts open the earth while alive, and that when dead fulfils various functions: it binds slaves or criminals (as rawhide), it contains liquor (as a leather flask or cup), it is made into footwear, and (if I interpret the metaphorical language of this riddle aright) it serves as a leather tankard that a household servant first drinks from and then scrubs out.⁴⁹ Williamson writes of the solution to this riddle as follows:

⁴⁸ Yet another reason for confidence in the *fisc ond flōd* solution is that this riddle has a clear precedent in Symphosius’s Riddle 12, *flumen et piscis*. Comparative evidence of this kind is not always decisive, for Old English riddlers were free to develop pre-existing riddle types in new directions, but this instance seems unproblematic.

⁴⁹ Sarah L. Higley, ‘The Wanton Hand: Reading and Reaching into Grammars and Bodies in Old English Riddle 12’, in *Naked Before God*, pp. 29–59, offers a thorough discussion of this riddle and its range of possible double meanings. The difficult lines are those in which the speaker states that ‘Sometimes a dark-haired Welsh woman, brought from afar — that foolish, drunken maidservant — lifts and presses me in the dark nights. She soaks me in water; sometimes she warms me nicely by the fire. In my bosom she sticks her wanton hand, often moving it about; she turns me (?) in the dark’ (lines 7b–13a). While these lines (which I give only in translation for the sake of brevity) encourage much guesswork on the bawdy side and their ‘innocent’ meaning too is not very clear, I suspect that their innocent sense is that a not wholly reliable serving woman first spends some time drinking from a leather tankard, then later washes it out and dries it.

Though all editors agree as to the general solution of *Rid.* 10,⁵⁰ there is some disagreement as to the specific term to be used. Dietrich (*ZfdA.* xi, 463) and Trautmann solve it as 'das Leder'; Tupper, as 'oxhide or leather'; Wyatt, as 'skin, hide, leather'; Mackie, as 'oxhide'. The term, 'leather', is too general; the term, 'oxhide', is hardly appropriate to the working beast in the beginning of the poem. The *ic* who speaks initially (lines 1–2) is the beast of burden. [. . .] It seems, therefore, most appropriate to solve *Rid.* 10 as 'ox'.⁵¹

Debate could continue for some while concerning whether the answer to this riddle is the living beast that pulls the plough or the leather made from its hide. Any such dispute is beside the point, however, for a satisfactory solution is provided by the OE alliterative doublet *oxa ond oxan-hȳd* 'ox and ox hide'. The felicity of this solution is enhanced when one considers it alongside the probable answer to Riddle 14, a near neighbour to Riddle 12 in the Exeter Book collection. This riddle, beginning *Ic wæs wāpenwiga*, is set in the voice of an ox (the 'weaponed warrior' of verse 1a, with a play on 'male warrior') which has been converted by a craftsman's skills into a war horn and a drinking horn with gold and silver chasings. A plausible twofold answer to this riddle is thus *oxa ond ox-horn*.

An example similar to these is Riddle 27, customarily solved as 'mead'. That word — or, preferably, the OE noun *medu* — ought to make up only half of the answer to this riddle, however, for a detailed account is given of the origin of the honey from which mead is produced through a process of fermentation. The first eight lines of the riddle are worth quoting, for they are easily ignored by readers who accept 'mead' as the uncomplicated answer:

Ic eom weorð werum, wide funden,
brungen of bearwum ond of burghleoþum,
of denum ond of dunum. Dæges mec wægun
fēpre on lifte, feredon mid liste
5 under hrofes hleo. Hæleð mec siþþan
baþedan in bydene. Nu ic eom bindere
ond swingere, sona weorpe
esne to eorþan, hwilum ealdne ceorl.

(I am cherished by men, searched out far and wide, brought from groves and mountainous slopes, from hills and dales. By day, feathers bear me aloft; they have carried me with pleasure under the incline of a roof. Afterwards, people bathed me in a vat. Now I am a binder and a scourger. In no time at all I toss a young man to the ground — and sometimes an old fellow, too!)

⁵⁰ That is, K-D Riddle 12 (Riddle 10 in Williamson's numeration).

⁵¹ Williamson, pp. 166–67.

The remainder of this riddle elaborates on the amusing effects of overindulgence in the consumption of mead: the toper is straightway seen on his back, helpless and witless. In the lines given here, the speaker tells of its former existence in the form of the nectar produced by wildflowers, which grow here and there in uncultivated areas. Bees — the metaphorical ‘feathers’ of 4a, in a double synecdoche whereby feathers stand for wings and wings stand for bees — gather the nectar and transport it to a ‘roofed structure’, the hive. People then collect the honeycombs, draw off tubs of honey, and let the honey ferment into mead, whereupon its alcoholic powers are both praised and lamented. An apt answer to this riddle is therefore a stylish alliterative pair, *mele-dēaw ond medu* ‘nectar (honey-dew) and mead’.

Riddle 51 is another example of one whose wit is fully revealed when one perceives that its solution is not a single word, but rather a pair of words that form a doublet linked by alliteration. It begins as follows:

Ic seah wrætlice wuhte feower
samed siþian; swearte wæran lastas,
swaþu swiþe blacu. Swift wæs on fore,
fuglum framra; fleag on lyfte,
deaf under yþe. (1–5a)

(I saw four creatures traveling together in a curious way. Swarthy were their tracks; their paths were very black. Swift was it on its journey, bolder yet than birds; it flew aloft, it dove under the wave.)

Nearly everyone agrees that what is disguised through this metaphorical diction is a pen, moving quickly and gracefully between the page and an inkwell. A scribe holds the pen between his thumb and two fingers. A plausible modern English solution for Riddle 51 is therefore ‘quill pen and fingers’. The felicity of a solution along those lines is enhanced, however, when the answer is given in Old English. The phrase *feþer ond fingras* ‘feather [pen] and fingers’ provides an elegant solution involving a pun that is lost in modern English, for the OE noun *feþer*, unlike either its modern reflex ‘feather’ or the current noun ‘pen’, denotes both ‘feather’ and ‘quill pen’.⁵² The best answer to this riddle is thus a neat alliterative doublet. Since the ‘creature’ in question is said to ‘fly aloft’ and travel

⁵² The *DOE*, s.v. *feþer*, senses 1 (‘feather’) and 3 (‘quill, pen’). Since the late Latin noun *penna* bears the same double meaning, the pun would have been a familiar one in a monastic setting. Trautmann, ‘Alte und neue Antworten’, pp. 195–98, opts for OE *feþer* as the solution to Riddle 51 without explicit discussion of the double entendre, which he perhaps takes for granted since modern German *Feder* has the same double sense.

‘even bolder than birds’, an answer that incorporates an allusion to a bird’s plumage is especially apt.⁵³

Puns and Other Wordplay: Riddles 57, 30, 60, 79/80, 83, 92, and 20

As should be clear by now, one rhetorical tool that Anglo-Saxon riddlers had at their disposal was the device of paronomasia, or punning. A good deal of attention has focused on the interest that Anglo-Saxon poets took in this rhetorical device.⁵⁴ What is not sufficiently realized, still, is the extent to which an alertness to puns not only contributes to one’s enjoyment of the art of the riddles, but also helps to solve them.

A half dozen Exeter Book riddles (in addition to three that have already been discussed)⁵⁵ depend upon puns or instances of prominent wordplay for their solutions. These are Riddles 57, 30, 60, 79/80, 83, and 92. Each one of these calls for analysis in turn. An additional riddle, number 20, deserves attention as well, for its solution involves a crucial pun that has been overlooked.

An example of a riddle involving wordplay as opposed to true paronomasia is Riddle 57. This text reads in its entirety as follows:

Deos lyft byreð lytle wihte
ofer beorghleopa. Þa sind blace swiþe,

⁵³ In the light of the evidence presented in this paragraph, the statement that ‘the pen would not necessarily have to be a quill’ (Williamson, p. 293) is worth scrutinizing, for a reed pen would not provide nearly so elegant a solution.

⁵⁴ Worth noting in this connection are Roberta Frank, ‘The Uses of Paronomasia in Old English Scriptural Verse’, *Speculum*, 47 (1972), 207–26; Robinson, ‘Artful Ambiguities’; and J. R. Hall, ‘Perspective and Wordplay in the Old English *Rune Poem*’, *Neoph*, 61 (1977), 453–60, to cite just three influential and insightful studies of wordplay in Old English poetry. Wordplay as a general phenomenon (as well as a technique available to Anglo-Saxon authors) is discussed in a discriminating manner by E. G. Stanley, ‘Playing Upon Words’, *NM*, 102 (2001), 339–56 and 451–68. In his chapter ‘The Play of Sound and Sense’, in *The Interpretation of Old English Poems* (London, 1972), pp. 84–108, Stanley B. Greenfield discusses a wide range of types of wordplay evidenced in Old English poetry and offers some practical guidelines for discerning whether or not a pun is present in a given passage.

⁵⁵ Two examples addressed in the previous part of this chapter are Riddle 51, whose proposed solution *feþer ond fingras* involves a pun on *feþer* in the two senses ‘pen’ and ‘feather’ or ‘wing’, and Riddle 73, whose solution *æsc* denotes both the living ash tree and the spear that is made from it. In chapter 3 above, I offer a solution for Riddle 75/76, *hund ond hind*, that is based on a conjectural visual pun.

swearte salopade. Sanges rope
 heapum ferað, hlude cirmað,
 5 tredað bearonæssas, hwilum burgsalo
 niþþa bearna. Nemnað hy selfe.

(The breeze lifts up little creatures over the mountain slopes. They are very black, swarthy, sable-coated. Bountiful with song, they travel in groups, they cry out loudly; they tread the wooded bluffs, sometimes also the houses of town-dwellers. They name themselves.⁵⁶)

There is general (though by no means universal) agreement that the answer to this riddle is some kind of bird. Moreover, if it is a bird, it is one that is completely black; and whatever bird of black colour is meant, it travels in groups, has a loud and noteworthy voice, and dwells both in the wilds of nature and in populated areas. It not only flies but walks — possibly a useful hint, since many birds are great fliers and perchers but are not known for their ‘treading’, and particularly not for their tendency to walk on people’s houses. Since the creature is said to ‘speak its own name’, the answer must be a bird with an onomatopoeic name — that is, a bird whose characteristic cry or call sounds very much like its name in Old English.

Many species of sable-hued birds have been proposed as possible candidates, some of them (like Williamson’s solution ‘swallows’) falling short of this last condition. Among the other avian candidates cited by Muir in his list of proposed solutions are starlings, swifts, jackdaws,⁵⁷ and house martins.⁵⁸ In addition, a veritable swarm of non-avian solutions have been proposed, including gnats, hailstones, raindrops, storm clouds, bees, musical notes, damned souls, demons, and flies, though none of these alternatives has as yet gained widespread support.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ For discussion of this last verse, see Muir, II, 653. Although it has sometimes been construed as an imperative construction (‘Name them yourselves’), a far more likely conclusion (since the words *hy* and *selfe* are in immediate juxtaposition) is that what is being said is that the birds ‘name themselves’.

⁵⁷ Erika von Erhardt-Siebold, ‘Old English Riddle No. 57: OE *Cā “Jackdaw”’, *PMLA*, 42 (1947), 1–8, argues for ‘jackdaw’ and tries to ascertain the unattested OE name for that bird. Her conclusion, that the bird’s onomatopoeic name was *cā, is intriguing but must remain speculative. Her line of inquiry would be more persuasive if the jackdaw were entirely black, as opposed to being black with a patch of grey plumage (although Jonathan Wilcox calls my attention to the phenomenon that the grey on jackdaws is often only seen as black).

⁵⁸ Muir, II, 663.

⁵⁹ Certainly the most learned of the many studies of this riddle is that of Audrey L. Meaney, ‘Exeter Book Riddle 57 (55): A Double Solution?’, *ASE* 25 (1996), 187–200. Meaney

This riddle seems to me less of a puzzle than others have found it to be. Following Ferdinand Holthausen,⁶⁰ I have little doubt that the black-hued mystery creatures whose name is to be guessed are *crāwan* ‘crows’. The bird with the OE name *crāwe* (cf. the modern Scottish and Northern English dialect form *craw*) fulfils every condition that must be met — particularly the one specified in the last verse, for crows, we are told, ‘are named for their typical call: “caw” or “crah”’.⁶¹ The riddler’s initial statement that birds of this kind are *lytle wihte* ‘little creatures’ might seem to stand in the way of this approach, but it need not do so. All we are told initially is that the item to be guessed is a small creature (OE *wiht*), not that it is a small bird. ‘Small’ and ‘large’ are relative terms, and crows are indeed small when compared with many other things. Elsewhere among the Exeter Book riddles this same term *wiht* is used to refer to a miscellany of ‘creatures’ of various sizes; these include a magpie (Riddle 24, line 1), the bagpipes (Riddle 31, lines 4, 19, and 24), a bullock (Riddle 38, lines 1 and 6), a merchant ship (Riddle 32, lines 5 and 14), and the sun and moon (Riddle 29, lines 1, 7, and 14), to cite just five examples.

If one wished to describe a carrion crow to someone who had never known one, a good start would be to characterize it as ‘a bird that is completely black, that has a loud voice, and that dwells either in the wilds of nature or in settled places’. The riddler’s specification that the creature is a good walker comes close to giving its identity away (even if it did not ‘speak its own name’), for crows are well known for their habit of alighting and walking.⁶² As for the loud ‘song’ that

argues for the double solution ‘swifts’ and ‘demons’. Still, swifts do not walk on people’s houses, nor do they have loud voices, nor can Meaney identify the OE name of the swift. As for arguments for ‘demons’ as a solution, they seem to me superfluous if a suitable species of loud-voiced, gregarious bird can be found. Wilcox, “‘Tell Me What I Am’”, proposes the solution ‘flies’ on the grounds that the OE plural noun *fleogan* ‘flies’ represents a ‘conceptual’ self-naming creature, ‘related as the name surely is to the verb *fleogan*’ (p. 57). This solution represents a triumph of ingenuity of which any riddler ought to approve, whatever answer is deemed ‘right’.

⁶⁰ Ferdinand Holthausen, ‘Ein altenglisches Rätsel’, *Germanisch-Romanische Monatsschrift*, 15 (1927), 453–54.

⁶¹ *The New Encyclopædia Britannica*, 15th edn, Micropaedia (Chicago, 1997), III, s.v. *crow*.

⁶² Meaney, ‘Exeter Book Riddle 57 (55)’, discounts the ‘crow’ solution on the grounds that crows ‘do not go in flocks unless they are rooks — which do not typically inhabit hills or human dwellings, but trees near arable land’ (p. 190). Still, *The New Encyclopedia Britannica*, s.v. ‘crow’, specifies that ‘crows are gregarious, and at times they roost together in great numbers’. Perhaps Meaney is thinking of ‘flocks’ in a more narrow sense (as in flights of starlings), but all that is said in Riddle 57 is that these creatures travel *hēapum* ‘in crowds’.

this bird is said to produce in some abundance (verse 3b), I take this to be an ironic reference to the raucous ‘craw’ of the *crāwe*, one of the most distinctive sounds in nature although scarcely a melodious one.

A riddle whose solution depends on an outright pun, as opposed to a play on words, is Riddle 30, which is written out in two slightly different versions in two separate sections of the Exeter Book. It begins, in the first of these versions, by describing a mystery object that plays in the wind (*Ic [. . .] lace mid winde*, 1). The object is also, however, a burning object and a glowing coal. Moreover, attendants pass it from hand to hand, and both noblemen and ladies kiss it. It is *bewunden mid wuldre* ‘enveloped in glory’, 2a, and at the end of the riddle we are told that people bow to it as a sign of future blessedness. One additional detail is given: it is a blossoming grove (*bearu blowende*, 4a). Given this abundance of information, there can be no doubt as to what is being described, at least in its general features: it is a tree (or a grove of trees), together with some firewood, a wooden cup, and a wooden cross. As happens with some frequency with the Exeter Book riddles,⁶³ a material thing is seen in successive modes of its temporal existence, first as something alive and growing and then as the material source from which crafted things are made. But what name can encompass all the details that are specified in this elaborate variation on that theme?

Here the appropriateness of a solution posed in the riddler’s own tongue is obvious, for the period-specific answer to the riddle can be none other than the OE noun *trēow*. The beauty of this solution is that this one word can mean both ‘tree’ and ‘wood’ and, in addition, ‘grove’ and ‘log’ and ‘an object made out of wood’, including specifically ‘the cross’.⁶⁴ The word *trēow*, used thus as the centrepiece of an extraordinarily multifaceted pun, accounts for each and every detail of this riddle, as no other word can do.

Similar in its riddling strategy is Riddle 60, which begins *Ic was be sonde, sæwealle neah* ‘I stood by the sand, near the seashore’. Partly on the basis of its

⁶³ Two examples are Riddle 76 (the *ācl/bāt* riddle analyzed at length in chapter 1) and Riddle 12 (the *ox ond oxan-hȳd* riddle discussed shortly above).

⁶⁴ See B-T, s.v. *trēow* (the neuter noun), where the following definitions are given: (I) ‘a tree’; (II) ‘wood’; (III) ‘trees, a wood’; and (IV) ‘a piece of wood, a beam, log, stake’. Also cited is (IVa) ‘tree as in gallows-tree, tree used of the cross’. In essence I follow Williamson’s reading of this riddle, which in turn is indebted to Trautmann’s critique of a solution proposed in 1900 by F. A. Blackburn, who argued for the OE noun *bēam* ‘tree, log, or cross’ as the solution. For discussion, see Williamson, pp. 230–31. The word *bēam* cannot serve collectively to denote a grove, however (as *trēow* can do), hence *trēow* is to be preferred.

resemblance to Symphosius's Riddle 2, which is explicitly titled *Harundo* (or *Arundo*, 'The Reed'),⁶⁵ this seventeen-line riddle has plausibly been taken to describe a personified reed and either a reed flute or a reed pen that has been made from it. The riddle by Symphosius, which consists of only three lines of Latin verse, presents its speaking reed first as a living thing, then as a flute and also a pen. The Old English riddle has generally been solved as either 'reed pipe' (that is, 'shepherd's flute') or 'reed pen', and each solution has had its advocates. The fact that the item in question is said to 'speak, mouthless, over the mead' (or 'mead-bench')⁶⁶ would seem to favour the flute interpretation, but the fact that the object later declares that it is bringing a personal message 'to thee alone, for the two of us only' (14b–15a) suggests that the item to be guessed is a pen that 'speaks' to a reader through some form of writing. Indeed, in an arresting self-referential moment, the reed pen is perhaps to be thought of as bringing to the individual reader of the Exeter Book this very poem, which 'speaks' from the silent vellum on which it is written. Thanks in part to the proximity of Riddle 60 to *The Husband's Message*, which immediately follows it in the manuscript and which has been thought by some readers to feature a speaking rune-stick, 'rune-staff' has also been proposed as a solution.⁶⁷

Arguments among the partisans of these different approaches have been continuing for some while without any great hope of reconciliation. There is little point in this debate, however, for Riddle 60 has a simple and elegant answer. That is the OE neuter noun *hrēod*. In his *Supplement* to Bosworth's dictionary, Toller offers the following definition of *hrēod*: (I) 'as a collective or generic term, *reed, the reed, reeds*'; (II) '*a reed (harundo)*'; (IIa) '*a reed for writing*'. In a manner similar to what we have seen with regard to *trēow* as an answer to Riddle 30, the one word *hrēod* thus serves to denote not only a single reed (or a group of reeds)

⁶⁵ Quoted by Williamson, p. 317.

⁶⁶ Chiefly for the sake of metre, Krapp and Dobbie and other editors emend MS *ofer meodu* 'over the mead' (9a) to *ofer meodubence* 'over the meadbench'.

⁶⁷ For discussion of these options, with bibliography, see Williamson, pp. 315–20 (his riddle number 58) and Muir, II, 692–93. Other more fanciful solutions have been suggested. Williamson concludes that 'whether the speaker of the riddle is a reed pen or a rune staff is a debatable point' (p. 315). In 'Runes and Riddles in Anglo-Saxon England', an essay published posthumously in *Lastworda Betst: Essays in Memory of Christine E. Fell*, ed. by Carole Hough and Kathryn A. Lowe (Donington, Lincolnshire, 2002), pp. 264–77, Christine E. Fell writes that 'Whether that object is a reed pen, a reed flute or, as runologists wistfully prefer to think, a rune stave is immaterial' (p. 273). At this point in her essay, however, what Fell is addressing is the riddler's use of the pathetic fallacy, not the solutions to the riddles.

but also a reed pen. Moreover, even though neither Bosworth nor Toller mention reed flutes in their definition of *hrēod*, the compound noun *hrēod-pīpere* ‘a reed-piper, player on a flute’ (spelled *readpipere*) occurs as a gloss on Latin *auledus*.⁶⁸ Old English *hrēod* thus can also refer to a reed flute. With this one word, then, all the conditions of the riddle are met. The reed grows in silence by the shore (or a clump of reeds do); later, converted into a flute, it ‘speaks over the mead’ (i.e. it makes music in the hall); and in addition, it is used to write a private message. A single reed (or a patch of reeds) could be the source of both a flute and a pen. This proposed solution for Riddle 60 should inspire no objections, for after all, it is no more than the vernacular equivalent to Symphosius’s *harundo*, a Latin word that likewise is used in all three of these senses.⁶⁹ No runesticks need be sought out here, for *hrēod* ‘a reed (or patch of reeds) and the instruments made out of it’ satisfies all the conditions of Riddle 60, just as *trēow* ‘a tree (or grove) and the items made out of it’ provides an elegant answer to Riddle 30.

Similarly, Riddle 79/80 has a very simple pun as its solution when the answer is posed in Old English.⁷⁰ This risqué exercise in wit describes an object that appears to be of impossibly twofold character. First, it is the ‘close companion of a nobleman’, who takes it with him on horseback on military expeditions. Second, it is something that is hand-held by a woman, who puts it to her lips ‘even though she be noble’. In that second capacity it contains ‘what grew up in the woods’ (that is, the mead that is made from honey), and so one can rest assured that what is alluded to is a drinking vessel rather than something less decorous. For one to answer the riddle correctly, all that is required is the knowledge that the OE word *horn* can denote both ‘a trumpet’ and ‘a drinking horn’.⁷¹ While the more precise compound nouns *gūþ-horn* ‘war-horn’ and *drenc-horn* ‘drinking horn’, when paired, could also be considered a correct solution proposed in the form of a doublet, the simplex noun *horn* provides exactly the answer that is wanted, for it dispels the mystery of how a single speaker could

⁶⁸ See Toller, s.v. *hrēod-pīpere*; the Corpus of Old English, s.v. *readpipere*.

⁶⁹ See the *Oxford Latin Dictionary*, ed. by P. G. W. Glare (Oxford, 1982; corrected edition, 1996), s.v. *harundo*. The word is defined as follows (citing only the relevant parts of that definition): (1) ‘a reed’; (2d) ‘a reed-pen’; (3a) ‘a shepherd’s pipe’.

⁷⁰ Following Williamson (p. 111), I think it best to consider these two riddles (as they are printed in Krapp and Dobbie) as a single one, though that point has no bearing on my argument.

⁷¹ Bosworth and Toller, s.v. *horn*.

have such a split personality. The modern English answer ‘horn’ that is accepted by most editors is therefore not wrong, but neither is it wholly adequate, for it lacks this semantic duplicity.

Another riddle whose solution depends on paronomasia is Riddle 83. Though missing some words at the start because of the burn-hole in this part of the manuscript, this riddle clearly describes something of value that has been wrested from the ground. The riddle has been solved as ‘gold’, or ‘ore’, or ‘money’, or the combination ‘ore, metal, money’. Since it contains difficulties of both text and interpretation (problems that I shall do my best to work through), it is best quoted in its entirety.

Frod wæs min fromcynn [.]
 biden in burgum, sibþan bæles weard
 [.] wera lige bewunden,⁷²
 fyre gefælsad. Nu me fah warað
 5 eorþan broþor, se me ærest wearð
 gumena to gyrne. Ic ful gearwe gemon
 hwa min fromcynn fruman agette
 eall of earde; ic him yfle ne mot,
 ac ic hæftnyd hwilum arære
 10 wide geond wongas. Hæbbe ic wunda fela,⁷³
 middangeardes mægen unlytel,
 ac ic miþan sceal monna gehwylcum
 degolfulne dom dyran cræftes,
 siðfæt mine. Saga hwæt ic hatte.

(Ancient was my tribe [. . . .] awaited among mountains,⁷⁴ after the guardian of fire [. . . .] of men, wrapped in flame, purified by fire. Now my hostile earthly brother keeps close custody of me, that same man who initially caused my affliction. I very clearly recall who, at the first, poured⁷⁵ my whole tribe from its home. I have no leave

⁷² The manuscript reading is *life bewunden* ‘enveloped in life’. Here I depart from the text as edited by Krapp and Dobbie and follow Muir, Williamson, and other editors in emending *life* to *lige* ‘flame’.

⁷³ Krapp and Dobbie emend *wunda* to *wundra* ‘marvels’. Following Williamson and Muir, I favour the manuscript reading.

⁷⁴ On the basis of context, I interpret *burgum* (2a) as the dative plural of *beorg* ‘mountain’, as opposed to the dative plural of *burh* ‘fortified enclosure; town or city’. This spelling of the word is an attested one; see the *DOE*, s.v. *beorg*.

⁷⁵ I interpret *āgētte* as a variant spelling of the preterite third-person singular form of *ā-gēotan* ‘to pour out’. This verb can also mean ‘to cast’ with reference to metallurgy. See the *DOE*, s.v. *ā-gēotan*, sense 2.

to do him no harm; on the contrary, I sometimes establish slavery over wide regions. I bear many wounds; I have power on earth that is great indeed, but through a certain pricey art I withhold from everyone my secretive might, my course of action. Tell what I am called.)

The riddle's speaking subject presents itself as a scion of an ancient race associated with the mountains. Human beings, seen here as wielders of fire, violently wrest it from its point of origin and purify it, 'pouring' it forth, in imagery that recalls the smelting of ore. Once refined into metal, the speaker has been forced to work in the service of men, its former 'enemies'. With some irony it now, in the form of iron fetters, is the instrument by which prisoners are shackled. The *wunda fela* that it bears are explained by Williamson as 'stamped impressions, letters, or figures' impressed on coins;⁷⁶ more generally, the phrase could refer to the marks left by hammers on any piece of forged metal. What might seem at first to be an enigmatic claim in lines 12–14a, that the speaker sometimes withholds its secretive power, requires little wit to interpret: persons who fall afoul of the law can sometimes avoid corporal punishment through monetary payment. The fact that the metal that is produced by smelting is sometimes used in coinage — an idea that is latent from the start, and that is easily inferred from the speaker's reference to his/its 'great power on earth' — finds most direct expression in the phrase *dyran cræftes*, which I have translated 'through a certain pricey art' (13b). In our contemporary world such a phrase might be taken as a reference to bribery as an aspect of bureaucratic corruption. People living in Anglo-Saxon England might have taken it as an allusion to the custom whereby persons found guilty of certain crimes were legally entitled to pay a fine (the *heals-fang*) in order to escape a flogging.⁷⁷

The solutions 'gold', 'ore', 'metal', and 'money' are thus all plausible responses to this riddle, but none of these words provides an answer in and of itself. There is an OE word, however, that fulfils every condition that must be met. This is the noun *ōra*. The primary meaning of this grammatically weak masculine noun is 'ore, metal in an unrefined state'.⁷⁸ In this sense it denotes the raw source of any metal, whether gold ore, silver ore, iron ore, lead ore, or any other. The same word denotes 'metal', for it occurs (in the dative plural

⁷⁶ Williamson, p. 369.

⁷⁷ Bosworth and Toller, s.v. *heals-fang*.

⁷⁸ Bosworth and Toller, s.v. *ōra*, the first of two entries for this word.

inflection) as a gloss on Latin *metallis*.⁷⁹ In addition, there exists an OE homophone, also spelled *ōra*, that denotes a small silver coin that was produced in large quantities in late Anglo-Saxon England, often being used in an effort to buy off Viking raiders with cash.⁸⁰ Punning on these various senses of the word, the author of Riddle 83 presents us with a speaker that is at one and the same time ore in the ground, metal that results from the process of smelting, the iron of which fetters are made, and coins that can mitigate punishment. Riddle 83 thus has an elegant one-word solution, *ōra*, that satisfies all its conditions.

The final example I will cite of a riddle whose solution is a pun is Riddle 92. The text of this riddle survives in a mutilated condition due to the same burn-hole that has damaged other texts in its vicinity. The gist of the riddle is clear enough despite this damage, however; and unlike the other riddles whose solutions are puns, this one has been solved successfully. It is still worth citing here, both for comparative purposes and because one of its interesting details has been overlooked.

Ic wæs brunra beot, beam on holte,
 freolic feorhbora ond foldan wæstm,
 weres wynnstaþol ond wifes sond,
 gold on geardum. Nu eom guðwigan
 5 hyhtlic hildewæpen, hringe beg[. . .
 ]e[.] byreð,
 oprūm [.]

(I was the boast of ruddy creatures; I was a tree in the wood, a noble living thing, a product of the earth; I was a man's seat of joy, and a woman's missive, and gold in the courtyards; now I am the joyful weapon of a warrior, [. . . .] with a ring; [. . . .] carries to others [. . . .].)

Any doubt as to the identity of the speaker evaporates as soon as one entertains the idea, first advanced by Alfred J. Wyatt in 1912, that the correct answer (which must be posed in Old English) is the word *bōc*. This solution rests on an apt pun, for *bōc* can refer to either of the two homophonic OE nouns whose meanings are (1) 'beech tree' (or possibly, in special instances, 'beechnuts' or 'mast') and (2) 'book' (or practically any kind of written document).⁸¹

⁷⁹ Toller, s.v. *ōra*, the first of two entries.

⁸⁰ Bosworth and Toller, s.v. *ōra*, the second of two entries.

⁸¹ The *DOE*, s.v. *bōc*² and *bōc*¹, respectively; *Old English Riddles*, ed. by A. J. Wyatt (Boston, 1912), p. 122.

The speaking subject, the *bōc*, is first seen as a living tree. As such it is the source of the beechnut mast that was a favoured source of food for swine (who are the ‘ruddy creatures’ of verse 1a). We are then told of the tree’s afterlife in the form of a series of carpentered objects. Its wood is made, apparently, into a seat or saddle. It is also trimmed into something wooden that could be passed from hand to hand (the ‘woman’s missive’ of verse 3b). Apparently it is converted into boards so as to serve as the main part of the binding of a book, or at least that is what can plausibly be inferred from the reference to ‘gold’ in 4a, where there is a possible allusion to life in monastic cloisters as well, if that is what the phrase *on geardum* (4a) is meant to imply.⁸² Because of the damaged state of the manuscript it is hard to say what happens next, but wood from a beech tree is perhaps also made into a wooden shield (the *wāpen* of 5a) that is equipped with a metal boss (the *hring* of 5b).⁸³ The last two lines do not admit of any interpretation, but they could conceivably refer to a beechwood bucket.

One detail of this riddle that deserves more scrutiny than it has yet received is verse 3b, *ond wifes sond*. What item made out of beech wood, one might well ask, would a woman be likely to send as a missive? That question could have many answers, of course, but one response that is uniquely apt is *a book*, or even *a writing surface* more generally. The OE noun *bōc* had a far wider semantic range than its modern reflex does, for it could refer to almost any kind of writing including epistles, charters, and the like. So the woman may be sending a letter. Indeed, since the wood of the beech has long been a preferred medium for the carving of inscriptions, there may be an allusion here (as Tupper suggested)⁸⁴ to the small slips of wood that in Old Norse are known as *rúnakefli* ‘rune-sticks’. R. I. Page has discussed such items and their uses in the Scandinavian world, calling attention to examples of *rúnakefli* recovered from the old wharfs at Bergen, Norway, that seem to have been written by women, but he does not discuss this passage.⁸⁵ If the phrase *ond wifes sond* ‘and a woman’s missive’ is indeed

⁸² It is tempting to see verse 3a, *weres winestapol*, as an allusion to a book seen as ‘the foundation of the wise’ (to quote from Riddle 47, verse 5a), as was suggested by Tupper, p. 235.

⁸³ See p. 81 above, note 51, on beech as a wood from which a shield could be made; this was not a wood favoured for that purpose, however.

⁸⁴ Tupper, p. 235. Tupper, however, speaks of a ‘staff’ in this connection, thinking of the speaking messenger in *The Husband’s Message* as such an object.

⁸⁵ Page, pp. 97–98.

a reference to the use of rune-sticks to bear messages, then this is a rare and possibly unique instance of such an allusion in Old English.⁸⁶

I will bring to an end this discussion of Exeter Book riddles whose understanding depends on puns by calling attention to Riddle 20, a long and involved text that has the consensus solution 'sword'. While that solution (or, to split hairs, its Old English equivalent, the noun *swēord*) is indeed the right answer, the riddler makes crucial allusion in 17a to another word that provides a risqué pun. That word is the neuter noun *wāpen*, which can denote either 'a weapon' — that is, in this context, a sword, the literal solution — or 'the male sexual organ, penis'.⁸⁷ Drawing on this semantic ambiguity, the author of Riddle 20 develops an elaborate play on words whereby the speaker, the personified *wāpen*, complains that it 'cannot have sex with a woman':

Ic wiþ bryde ne mot
hæmed habban, ac me þæs hyhtplegan
geno wyrneð, se mec geara on
bende legde; forþon ic brucan sceal
on hagatealde hæleþa gestreona.
Oft ic wirum dol wife abelge,
wonie hyre willan; heo me wom spreceð,
flocēð hyre folmum, firenaþ mec wordum [. . .]. (27b–34)

(I cannot have intercourse with a bride, but he who laid me in bonds in former years still denies me that pleasurable play. For that reason, living in celibacy as a dependent, I have no choice but to partake of the treasures of warriors. Often, a fool in my gold finery, I anger a woman, I diminish her pleasure; she curses me, she beats her hands in anger, she reviles me with words [. . .].)

⁸⁶ While discussing *The Husband's Message* (at pp. 230–32 below) I question whether there is indeed any allusion to rune-sticks there. This poem has been thought by Page, pp. 101–02, to include the sole reference to the use of *rúnakefli* in Anglo-Saxon England. On rune-sticks and their use by Viking Age women, see also Janet Schrunck Ericksen, 'Runesticks and Reading *The Husband's Message*', *NM*, 99 (1998), 31–35.

⁸⁷ Bosworth and Toller, s.v. *wāpen*: (I) 'a weapon'; (II) 'membrum virile'. Correspondingly, to be a *wāpen-mann* or *wāpned-mann* is to be a male human being, whether or not one is armed with weapons; likewise, to be *wāpned* (adj.) is to be male. Sense II of this noun remained current in English at least until the late fourteenth century, when William Langland offered some sage counsel on the topic of a young man's use of his 'wepene': 'Whiles thou art yong, and thi wepene kene, / Wreke thee with wyvyng' (While you are young, and your 'weapon' is sharp, vent yourself through marriage). William Langland, *The Vision of Piers Plowman*, B version, ed. by A. V. C. Schmidt (London, 1978), Passus IX, lines 182–83 (at p. 98).

The speaking sword/phallus tells with some regret that ever since the day it was forged, it has been deprived of the pleasures of sex. The phrase *on bende* (29b–30a) may have reference to either of two things: first, in general, to the state of ‘servitude’ that binds the sword to its owner, and second to the literal clamps that are used in the process by which a pattern-welded blade is forged.⁸⁸ Pursuing the theme of sexual restraint (for the word *bend* can also refer to the regulations of the Benedictine Rule),⁸⁹ the speaker then refers to its life *on hagostealde* ‘in a lord’s service’. While this phrase is normally used of a bachelor living in a lord’s household, in a monastic context it refers to the state of celibacy. That latter meaning is relevant here as well, for it confirms the theme of a life devoted to something other than erotic pleasure. The speaker then states that rather than being able to take part in sexual play, it is bound by nature and fate to ‘partake of the treasures of warriors’. I take this as an oblique and ironic reference to the manner in which, in the thick of battle, a sword both gives and receives blows. The theme of combat is reinforced in the next lines as the speaker, referring in a self-deprecating fashion to the gold wires that decorate its hilt, acknowledges that all such finery still cannot change its nature as a ‘fool’ in bed. All this poor *wāpen* can do is to strike and kill warriors, it seems. The speaker thus ‘diminishes the pleasure’ of a woman not just by being unable to satisfy her sexually, but also by outright slaughter of her husband, or brother, or father, or son. As a result, it rightly earns her vilification.

The irony that is contained in the last three verses quoted above seems to me both savage, in the typical manner of Old English and Old Norse ‘battle irony’ that shrugs off the horrors of war, and poignant, in its image of a distraught woman beating her hands in a paroxysm of futile rage.⁹⁰ In any event, this part of Riddle 20 is built upon one of the most elaborate and effective sequences of wordplay to be found anywhere in Old English verse. Williamson, in the commentary to his edition, is very well attuned to the sexual play in this riddle and to the notion that a phallus can be spoken of as a ‘weapon’, but he makes no

⁸⁸ For photographs showing the use of a particular type of clamp by a present-day master swordsmith, see Jim Hrisoulas, *The Pattern-Welded Blade: Artistry in Iron* (Boulder, CO, 1994), pp. 21, 62, and 78.

⁸⁹ The *DOE*, s.v. *bend*, sense 1.b.ii.a.

⁹⁰ The bereaved woman is hardly to be thought of as ‘the only picture of the shrew or scold in Old English poetry’, as is stated by Tupper, p. 113 (note on Riddle 21, line 33f.). To give vent to grief (if that is what is meant here), or to call for vengeance for the killing of a loved one (if that is what is meant), is scarcely the same thing as being a scold.

explicit reference to the pun on the OE neuter noun *wāpen* or to the other possible instances of wordplay in this passage (including the phrases *on bende* and *on hagatealde*). Nor does Donald Kay (while making a case for ‘phallus’ as the risqué solution to Riddle 20 seen as a double entendre riddle) make mention of the word *wāpen* as the key element in the poem’s ambiguity.⁹¹ There is therefore some justification for the foregoing analysis.

Conclusion: Approaching the Riddles through Lexicography

In the main body of this chapter I have discussed a number of specific examples that illustrate the guiding concept that an Exeter Book riddle should not be considered solved until a felicitous answer is given to it in Old English. The advantages of a lexicographically based approach to the riddles ought to be evident by now, but for the sake of clarity they are worth summarizing.

(1) One may discover words that have attracted little notice in the critical literature, and hence some neglected areas of thought may be opened up for inspection. An example is the word *maþa* ‘maggot’ in Riddle 47, which tells of damage done to the psalter, specifically, rather than indiscriminate bibliophagia. To arrive at the answer to Riddle 26 (*Cristes bōc*), one must do some thinking about the Bible and how it was encountered in Anglo-Saxon libraries. The answer to Riddle 27, solved here as *mele-dēaw ond medu*, invites reflection about bee-keeping in early medieval society, while the answer to Riddle 28, solved here as *bere ond ealu*, directs attention to the brewing of the ale that has long been an indispensable feature of the English village economy.

(2) Wordplay may be discovered that had been overlooked. Not only is one’s awareness of the literary art of the riddles thereby enhanced, as with Riddle 19, with its extremely clever manner of spelling out its answer *snac(c)*, or Riddle 20, the sword-riddle with its elaborate play on *wāpen*. In addition, six riddles that depend on puns for their solutions can be ascribed a more satisfactory answer than they have previously received in the critical literature. These are Riddle 30 *trēow*, Riddle 51 *feþer ond fingras*, Riddle 60 *hrēod*, Riddle 73 *æsc*, Riddle 79/80 *horn*, and Riddle 83 *ōra*. These are in addition to Riddle 92, which Wyatt solved as *bōc*.

(3) One may take pleasure in the ways that aural effects are an aspect of the riddles’ solutions. Good examples are those riddles whose solutions consist of

⁹¹ Donald Kay, ‘Riddle 20: A Revaluation’, *Tennessee Studies in Literature*, 13 (1968), 133–39.

alliterative doublets, such as Riddle 44 *cæg ond clustor* and Riddle 85 *fisc ond flōd*. These examples are chosen out from among numerous instances of alliterative felicity that could be cited, such as the delightful (even if speculative) *blæst-belg* that I offer as the solution to Riddle 37.

Finally, though not necessarily most importantly, (4) one may sometimes discover the answer to a riddle for which no consensus solution has yet been found. In chapter 1, I have argued with confidence for the novel solution *āc ond bāt* for Riddle 74. In chapter 2, I have suggested **wāpen-hengen* as the precise answer to Riddle 55. In chapter 3, my solution *ᚱ-ᚱᚱᚱ* (**rād-rōd*) for Riddle 58 is, I think, novel enough to be mentioned in this category as well, for the observation that this riddle can only be answered in the medium of runic script has not been made before. Another example discussed in chapter 3 is Riddle 75/76 *hund ond hind*, if my not entirely novel suggestion concerning that problematic text is accepted.

Included as an appendix to this chapter is a list of the riddles of the Exeter Book with what I consider to be their most probable solutions. Different readers will have their own favourite answers to many of the riddles; these happen to be mine. With greater caution, it might be better to say that these happen to be my favoured solutions at this moment of writing on 12 September 2005 (when I am making my last revisions for this book), for it is a well-known fact that persons who spend much time worrying over the Exeter Book riddles soon discover that they have minds that blow with the winds, now east and now west. After all, riddling is a pastime where an oven is a bookcase is an inkwell is a duck.

For each item in the following list, the proposed solution is offered first in modern English and then in the vocabulary that represents, as far as I can judge, the word or phrase that English speakers living roughly a thousand years ago might well have used when posing that same answer. The Old English solution should be considered the primary one of which the modern wording is a reflex. Where the answer to a riddle is a postulated word that is unattested in the manuscript records, it is asterisked. Such answers can never have final authority; but then again, neither can any of the others.

EXETER BOOK RIDDLE SOLUTIONS IN OLD ENGLISH

K-D = Krapp and Dobbie; W = Williamson; M = Muir. Where a Latin equivalent to the Old English solution seems a viable alternative, it is cited. Where either grammatical gender or natural gender points to the riddle's solution as masculine (m.) or feminine (f.), that fact is noted. For the double entendre riddles, only the innocent solution is given since that is usually the only one requiring ingenuity. A line of dashes indicates where a solution to the riddle has not seemed worth venturing, given either the riddle's obscurity or the damaged condition of the manuscript (two factors that often converge). As is my general practice, *DOE* spellings are given for words beginning with the letters A through F, and B-T spellings for words beginning with the remainder of the alphabet. Where a solution cited in this list is discussed in the present book somewhere other than in the preceding chapter, a note points to that fact.

Although I have confidence in most features of this list (which largely represents consensus opinion about riddle solutions, leaving questions of language aside), it still must be regarded as a tentative one that is subject to improvement as new insights into the Exeter Book riddles are gained and as additional letters of the *DOE* are published.

K-D 1-3 (W ₁)	storm / wind / God ¹	<i>storm / wind / God</i>
K-D 4 (W ₂)	water bucket ²	<i>water-stoppa</i>
K-D 5 (W ₃)	shield	<i>scild</i>
K-D 6 (W ₄)	sun	<i>sunne</i>
K-D 7 (W ₅)	swan	<i>swān</i>
K-D 8 (W ₆)	nightingale	<i>nihtegale</i>
K-D 9 (W ₇)	cuckoo	<i>gēac</i> (m.) (Lat. <i>cuculus</i>)
K-D 10 (W ₈)	barnacle goose	<i>byrnete</i> (f.) (Lat. <i>bernaca</i>)
K-D 11 (W ₉)	beaker of wine	<i>wīn ond wīn-fæt</i>

K-D 12 (W ₁₀)	an ox and its hide	<i>oxa ond oxan-hȳd</i>
K-D 13 (W ₁₁)	ten chickens	<i>tīen cicenu</i>
K-D 14 (W ₁₂)	an ox and its horns	<i>oxa ond ox-horn³</i>
K-D 15 (W ₁₃)	fox and hound ⁴	<i>fox ond hund</i>
K-D 16 (W ₁₄)	anchor	<i>ancor</i> (m.)
K-D 17 (W ₁₅)	quiver or bee-skep ⁵	<i>cocer</i> or <i>*bēo-lēap</i>
K-D 18 (W ₁₆)	jug (of wine?) ⁶	<i>crōg; wīn-crōg?</i>
K-D 19 (W ₁₇)	light warship ⁷	<i>snac(c)</i>
K-D 20 (W ₁₈)	sword	<i>swēord</i> (m.), with wordplay on <i>wāpen</i>
K-D 21 (W ₁₉)	plow	<i>sulh</i> (f.)
K-D 22 (W ₂₀)	Ursa Major	<i>Carles wān</i>
K-D 23 (W ₂₁)	bow	<i>boga</i>
K-D 24 (W ₂₂)	magpie ⁸	<i>higoræ (higere)</i> (f.)
K-D 25 (W ₂₃)	onion	<i>cīpe-lēac?</i> ⁹
K-D 26 (W ₂₄)	Gospel book	<i>Cristes bōc</i>
K-D 27 (W ₂₅)	mead (and its source)	<i>mele-dēaw ond medu</i>
K-D 28 (W ₂₆)	ale (and its source)	<i>bere ond ealu</i>
K-D 29 (W ₂₇)	moon and sun	<i>mōna ond sunne</i>
K-D 30 (W ₂₈)	a tree / grove / firewood / wooden objects	<i>trēow</i>
K-D 31 (W ₂₉)	bagpipes	<i>*blæst-pīpe</i> (f.)? ¹⁰
K-D 32 (W ₃₀)	merchant ship ¹¹	<i>cēap-scip</i>
K-D 33 (W ₃₁)	ice-floe	<i>īs</i>
K-D 34 (W ₃₂)	rake	<i>raca</i>
K-D 35 (W ₃₃)	mail coat	<i>byrne</i> (Lat. <i>lorica</i>)
K-D 36 (W ₃₄)	[complex solution] ¹²	————
K-D 37 (W ₃₅)	bellows	<i>blæst-belg</i>
K-D 38 (W ₃₆)	bull calf (young ox)	<i>bulluc</i> (m.)
K-D 39 (W ₃₇)	auspicious dream ¹³	<i>swefn</i> (Lat. <i>somnium</i>)
K-D 40 (W ₃₈)	Creation	<i>gesceaft</i> (Lat. <i>creatura</i>)
K-D 41 (W ₃₉)	water	<i>wæter</i>
K-D 42 (W ₄₀)	cock and hen	<i>hana ond hæn</i>
K-D 43 (W ₄₁)	soul and body	<i>gæst</i> (m.) <i>ond līc-hama</i> (m.)
K-D 44 (W ₄₂)	key and lock	<i>cæg ond clustor</i>
K-D 45 (W ₄₃)	dough	<i>dāh</i>
K-D 46 (W ₄₄)	Lot and his offspring	<i>Lōð ond his tūdor</i>
K-D 47 (W ₄₅)	maggot and psalter	<i>maþa</i> (m.) <i>ond sealm-bōc</i>

K-D 48 (W ₄₆)	paten	<i>hūsel-disc</i> (Lat. <i>paten</i>)
K-D 49 (W ₄₇)	bread and oven	<i>hlāf ond ofen</i> (m.)
K-D 50 (W ₄₈)	fire	<i>lig</i> (m.)
K-D 51 (W ₄₉)	quill pen and fingers	<i>fēper ond fingras</i>
K-D 52 (W ₅₀)	flail	<i>perscel</i>
K-D 53 (W ₅₁)	gallows / cross ¹⁴	<i>gealg-trēow</i>
K-D 54 (W ₅₂)	churn and butter ¹⁵	<i>cyrn</i> (f.) <i>ond butere</i>
K-D 55 (W ₅₃)	weapon rack	<i>*wāpen-hengen?</i> ¹⁶
K-D 56 (W ₅₄)	tapestry and loom	<i>webb ond web-bēam</i>
K-D 57 (W ₅₅)	crows	<i>crāwan</i>
K-D 58 (W ₅₆)	well sweep	R-RFH (<i>*rād-rōd</i>) ¹⁷
K-D 59 (W ₅₇)	chalice	<i>hūsel-fæt</i> (Lat. <i>callex</i>)
K-D 60 (W ₅₈)	reed / reed pipe / reed pen	<i>hrēod</i>
K-D 61 (W ₅₉)	shirt	<i>cyrtel</i> (m.)
K-D 62 (W ₆₀)	augur	<i>nafu-gār</i> (m.)
K-D 63 (W ₆₁)	glass beaker	<i>glæs-fæt</i>
K-D 64 (W ₆₂)	ship	<i>brim-hengest</i> ¹⁸
K-D 65 (W ₆₃)	onion	<i>cīpe</i> (f.)
K-D 66 (W ₆₄)	Creation; God? ¹⁹	<i>gesceaft</i> (Lat. <i>creatura</i>) or <i>God</i>
K-D 67 (W ₆₅)	_____	_____
K-D 68 (W _{66:1-2} ; M _{68:1-2})	_____	_____
K-D 69 (W _{66:3} ; M _{68:3})	ice or frozen pond	<i>īs or īs-mere</i>
K-D 70:1-4 (W ₆₇ ; M ₆₉)	church bell ²⁰	<i>cyricean belle</i>
K-D 70:5-6 (W ₆₈ ; M ₇₀)	candle ²¹	<i>candel</i>
K-D 71 (W ₆₉)	sword	<i>swēord</i>
K-D 72 (W ₇₀)	ox	<i>oxa</i>
K-D 73 (W ₇₁)	spear (made of ash wood)	<i>æsc</i> (m.)
K-D 74 (W ₇₂)	ship (made of oak wood)	<i>āc</i> (f.) <i>ond bāt</i> (m.) ²²
K-D 75/76 (W ₇₃ ; M ₇₅)	hound and hind	<i>hund</i> (m.) <i>ond hīnd</i> (f.)
K-D 77 (W ₇₄ ; M ₇₆)	oyster	<i>ostre</i> (f.)
K-D 78 (W ₇₅ ; M ₇₇)	crab ²³	<i>crabba</i>
K-D 79/80 (W ₇₆ ; M _{78/79}) ²⁴	horn	<i>horn</i>

K-D 81 (W77; M80)	weather vane	<i>*weder-coc</i> (m.)? ²⁵
K-D 82 (W78; M81)	————	————
K-D 83 (W79; M82)	ore / metal / coins	<i>ōra</i>
K-D 84 (W80; M83)	water	<i>water</i>
K-D 85 (W81; M84)	fish and river	<i>fisc ond flōd</i> (m.)
K-D 86 (W82; M85)	one-eyed seller of garlic	<i>ān-ēagede gār-lēac monger</i>
K-D 87 (W83; M86)	bellows	<i>blāst-belg</i>
K-D 88 (W84; M87)	ink well (made from an antler)	<i>heortes horn</i> ²⁶
K-D 89 (W85; M88)	————	————
K-D 90 (W86; M89)	[Latin riddle]	————
K-D 91 (W87; M90)	key	<i>cæg</i>
K-D 92 (W88; M91)	beech tree / book / objects made of beech wood	<i>bōc</i>
K-D 93 (W89; M92)	ink well	<i>blac-horn</i>
K-D 94 (W90; M93)	Creation	<i>gesceaft</i> ; Lat. <i>creatura</i>
K-D 95 (W91; M94)	moon?	<i>mōn</i>

¹ The most satisfactory account of Riddles 1–3 of which I am aware is given by Mercedes Salvador in an as yet unpublished study of this three-part sequence. She shows that each part has the initial solution ‘wind’ (or ‘wind as the cause of storm’), and that the solver must then identify God as the master who sends the wind.

² Although Muir (II, 655) calls Riddle 4 ‘perhaps the most perplexing of all the riddles’ and regards it as ‘unsolved’, he makes no mention of the ‘bucket’ solution that has been argued independently by Ann Harleman Stewart, ‘The Solution to Old English Riddle 4’, *SPh*, 78 (1981), 52–61, and A. N. Doane, ‘Three Old English Implement Riddles: Reconsiderations of Numbers 4, 49, and 73’, *MPh*, 84 (1987), 243–57. As a supplement to their convincing arguments, I offer the suggestion that what is described is a water bucket of the kind that, possibly attached to a well sweep, draws up water from a well. The exact OE solution is therefore not simply *stoppa*, the normal term for ‘bucket’, but *water-stoppa* (see Toller, s.v. that word). The bucket that is described here in riddling fashion has apparently been standing out all night in winter and, when lowered into the well, must break through some ice that has formed on the surface of the water.

³ Williamson suggests that the objects to be guessed in both Riddle 14 and Riddle 79–80 (another ‘horn’ riddle) are great aurochs’ horns similar to the drinking horns discovered at Sutton Hoo (p. 170). I wonder if anything so grand and rare is meant. As a rule, the answers to the Exeter Book riddles are commonplace things that are described in exotic terms. What is disguised here is more likely to be any handsome ox or cow horn, an object that a craftsman could readily convert into either a war horn or a drinking vessel.

⁴ Riddle 15 is solved by some readers as ‘badger’ or ‘hedgehog’ or some other mammal. The ‘fox’ solution accords well with the poet’s description of the creature as a swift one with a white

neck and two high, prominent ears. Like a fox, moreover, this creature seeks to evade an intruder (a hunting dog) through stealth and flight, though it is also a deadly fighter. Since the hunting dog plays a large part in the riddle, I include it as part of the solution. The solution 'red fox' has recently been argued in convincing detail by Audrey L. Meaney, 'The Hunted and the Hunters: British Mammals in Old English Poetry', *ASSAH*, 11 (2000), 95–105 (at pp. 98–103). Meaney points out that the precise answer to the riddle must in fact be 'vixen', for it is the female of the species that, when threatened, will shift with its young to a new den. She also points out that the dog must be a terrier of some description. Likewise, Teresa Fiocco, 'Gli animali negli enigma anglossoni dell'*Exeter Book*', in *Simbolismo animale e letteratura*, ed. by Dora Faraci (Rome, 2003), pp. 133–57, accepts that this riddle concerns a fox harried by a dog. Her statement that this is 'L'unico animale selvatico rappresentato negli enigma' (the only wild animal represented in the riddles) can be accepted only if one thinks in terms of wild animals that are predators. Other riddles (if one accepts these solutions) feature such creatures as the wild swan (7), crows (57), a hind (75/76), a stag (88), and various other avian and marine species. All these animals are seen primarily in relation to the human life world, not the wild world of nature, so nature is to some extent domesticated.

⁵ Jonathan Wilcox, 'New Solutions to Old English Riddles: Riddles 17 and 53', *PQ*, 69 (1990), 393–408, offers persuasive arguments for solving Riddle 17 as 'quiver', though Muir, not citing Wilcox's study, calls the answer 'uncertain' (II, 657). On the other hand, Marijane Osborn, "'Skep" (*Beinenkorb*, **beoleap*) as a Culture-Specific Solution to *Exeter Book* Riddle 17', *ANQ*, 18.1 (2005), 7–17, has now made an even more plausible period-specific argument for 'bee-skep' (OE **bēo-lēap*) as the solution, suggesting that the poet's description of the 'mystery item' exactly fits the type of bee-hive that would have been known to the Anglo-Saxons. This was an inverted woven basket, encircled by withies (metaphorical 'wires'), that would have been filled with a 'belly-hoard' of honey and that would, of course, have also contained bees, which fly from it with their 'horrible poison spears'. The OE term for quiver is *cocer*; the OE name for skep is unknown, though Osborn's **bēo-lēap* is a plausible suggestion. Although the 'quiver' solution (both the concept and the OE word) was first aired as a possibility by Franz Eduard Dietrich, 'Die Rätsel des Exeterbuchs: Würdigung, Lösung und Herstellung', *ZfdA*, 11 (1859), 232–52 (at p. 465), Dietrich came down for 'ballista' as the answer on the basis of Latin parallels, and in that choice he has been followed by several editors including, tentatively, Krapp and Dobbie (p. 331). Given the lack of evidence that the ballista was a weapon in use by the Anglo-Saxons, however, either 'quiver' or, even better, 'skep' is to be preferred on the grounds that both of these were commonplace objects.

⁶ What is described in Riddle 18, even if in only the briefest of terms, is a jug or other container stacked among other such containers in a ship. Wine was an important import from the Continent, and so I tentatively suggest OE *wīn-crōg* as a period-specific solution. An equally speculative solution is *wīn-sester*. The riddler might possibly have in mind yet another type of container, a leather bottle or wooden cask, with allusion to the mouth of the bottle or the bung-hole of the cask. Understandably, Muir (II, 657) finds the solution to this riddle 'uncertain', for one is scarcely given enough information to specify what kind of container is meant.

⁷ What is described in Riddle 19 is a horse, a man, and a hawk travelling over a swift-flowing road, with these elements partly spelled out in runes. The riddle is therefore an elaborate ship metaphor, and Griffith, 'Riddle 19 of the Exeter Book' (see above, p. 105 and note 8) has succeeded in pinpointing its answer as the word *snac(c)* 'light warship'.

⁸ Muir (II, 658) cites magpie, jay, woodpecker, and mime as proposed solutions to Riddle 24. Williamson's solution 'jay' (pp. 207–08; his number 22) is unconvincing because the jay does not sing in a variety of different tones or styles, as this creature is said to do, and indeed Williamson himself favours magpie over jay in *A Feast of Creatures* (London, 1983), pp. 82 and 177. The magpie, which is a member of the same subfamily of *garrulinae*, is a great mimic and so has the desired vocal characteristics. But the correct answer is OE *higora* (usually spelled *higora*), whatever bird that name denoted.

⁹ The OE name for the onion is *cipe* (a loan-word from Lat. *cepe*) or *cipe-lēac*; other recorded names are *hwit-lēac* and *ynne-lēac*. The onion known to the Anglo-Saxons apparently resembled a leek (*lēac*) closely enough in taste or form for the two names to be used almost interchangeably. *Cipe* is a feminine noun and therefore cannot be the answer, since a solution of masculine gender is indicated by the phrase *mec* [. . .] *rēadne* (8a). Although OE *lēac* and its compounds are of neuter gender, the Old Icelandic cognate noun *laukr* is masculine. The gender of OE *lēac* may therefore have become somewhat unstable due to Norse influence. *Cipe-lēac* thus seems the best option in the circumstances, though that solution cannot be offered with confidence. Jonathan Wilcox suggests to me (in a private communication) that *gār-lēac* 'garlic' may make for an attractive solution, one that 'puts the phallic *gār* ('spear') into the title to match the upthrusting vegetable' that is described. Garlic, however, does not cause tears, and so the riddle's last verse would go unexplained.

¹⁰ While 'bagpipes' is the accepted solution to Riddle 31, the native English name for that musical instrument (Lat. *chorus*) is unattested. I postulate **blāst-pipe* 'wind pipe' on the basis of the simplex noun *pipe* 'pipe' or 'flute' and the compound noun *blāst-belg* 'wind bag' or 'bellows' (cited above as the solution to Riddles 37 and 87). The equivalent term in modern German is *Sackpfeife*, a solution offered by Franz Dietrich in 1859 ('Die Rätsel', p. 469). The word *pipe* naturally refers first and foremost to the instrument's chanter, which (as any aspiring piper is taught) is a pipe that 'sings' (3b). The chanter — here metaphorically called the instrument's 'foot', 17a, for it extends downward — is affixed to the bag that contains the instrument's *hord* 'treasure' (the piper's breath). Extending above, resting close by the piper's neck (*on halse*, 21a), are two drones, here called the chanter's 'brothers' (22b). The fact that *pipe* 'pipe' is a feminine noun (as is **blāst-pipe*) supports my conjectural solution, for the item to be guessed is emphatically referred to by feminine pronouns (*sio* 5a, *hyre* 6b, *hēo* and *hyre* 13a, *hēo* 14b, *hio* 16b, *hyre* 17a). Although these feminine pronouns are in grammatical agreement with the feminine noun *wiht* 'creature' that stands in for the mystery item, their insistent presence encourages the supposition that the answer to be guessed should be a word of feminine gender. The OE noun *swegel-horn* (Dietrich's proposed OE answer) is a less likely solution as it is of masculine gender. Moreover, that word is a rare one whose referent is uncertain, so that the only definition offered for it by Bosworth and Toller is 'Some kind of musical instrument'.

¹¹ 'Ship' is the generally accepted solution to Riddle 32. To be precise, what is disguised here is a cargo vessel, one that 'is useful to humankind, conveys an abundance of food [. . .] and brings to men the tribute of every harvest' (9b–12a). A more precise solution is therefore 'merchant ship' (*cēap-scip*).

¹² A solution to this riddle is offered in chapter 3 above, at pp. 85–89.

¹³ Refining Stanley Greenfield's solution to this riddle, Antonina Harbus, 'Exeter Book Riddle 39 Reconsidered', *SN*, 70 (1998), 139–48, makes clear that the full answer is 'true or revelatory dream'. The OE noun *swefn* is therefore a felicitous solution, for that word generally refers to true dreams (as opposed to illusions, for which the term is *gedwimor*). The equivalent Latin term *somnium* is also an apt solution, as it calls to mind the learned discourse in Latin concerning dreams and their significance.

¹⁴ Riddle 53 has unconvincingly been solved as 'battering ram', among other misplaced guesses. Wilcox, 'New Solutions', pp. 398–403, offers the persuasive solution 'gallows'. What the whole of the riddle concerns is the gallows used both as an instrument of punishment and as the means of salvation through Christ's willing self-sacrifice. Although the simplex noun *gealga* could be proposed as the OE answer, a better solution is the compound noun *gealg-trēow*, which at the same time calls up the idea of both 'gallows' and 'cross'. See B-T, s.v. *galg-trēow* and *gealg-trēow*.

¹⁵ Riddle 54 is customarily solved as 'churn'. Somewhat preferable is the doublet 'churn and butter' (*cyrn ond butere*), seeing that the last lines of the riddle make much of the product of the churning, which 'good people often delight in and buy with cash'.

¹⁶ This riddle is the subject of chapter 2 above.

¹⁷ Solved as such in chapter 3 above, at pp. 89–92.

¹⁸ Riddle 64 is a cryptographic ship riddle comparable to Riddle 19. It begins with the metaphor of a horse (*wicg*: the ship) traveling over a meadow (*wong*: the sea). An apt solution posed in the language and idiom of the riddler would therefore be not the literal nouns *scip* or *bāt* but the kenning *brim-hengest* 'sea-steed' (a metaphor deployed at *Andreas* 513b and *The Rune Poem* 47a and 66a). Alternatively, either *mere-hengest* (Riddle 4, verse 6b) or *sā-hengest* (*Andreas* 488a) might be preferred.

¹⁹ Although customarily solved as 'Creation', this short devotional riddle differs from the other Creation riddles (nos 40 and 94) in that it seems to speak of God *in* the Creation rather than of the created universe itself. Departing from a consensus of editors, I therefore suggest (following Conybeare, as cited in Williamson, p. 333) that a felicitous solution to Riddle 66 is the Deity.

²⁰ Although this riddle (lines 1–4 of K-D 70) has been the victim of some loss and confusion in the course of its scribal transmission (for in its imperfect state it has become conjoined with the next riddle, from which it ought to be distinct), it has been construed intelligibly by Pinsker and Ziegler, *Die altenglischen Rätsel*, who solve it as 'bell'. Moreover, since reference is made to the item's 'two sharp shoulders' (3b–4a), the solution must be a bell that is hung from some kind of substantial housing, as bells in a *bell-hūs* 'belfry' are hung. The solution *cyricean-belle* thus seems apt. Williamson (pp. 677–68) prefers 'lyre' as a solution, while Muir (II, 736) favours 'harp', but the statement that the item has a 'crooked neck, cunningly wrought' (2b) would not apply to the type of lyre that is best known from this period (the 'Sutton Hoo' type, now well known to archaeologists).

²¹ Solved as such in chapter 3 above, at pp. 92–96.

²² This solution is offered in chapter 1 above.

²³ The solution ‘crab’ for Riddle 78, though necessarily tentative given the mutilated state of the manuscript, is persuasively argued by Mercedes Salvador, ‘The Oyster and the Crab: A Riddle Duo (nos. 77 and 78) in the *Exeter Book*’, *MPh*, 101 (2004), 400–19.

²⁴ Krapp and Dobbie take these lines to constitute two separate riddles, as does Muir. With greater plausibility in my view, Williamson reads them as a single riddle. Not much depends on one’s choice in this regard.

²⁵ While few would dispute that Riddle 81 describes a weather vane (or weathercock), the OE name of that item is not attested. Trautmann’s solution **weder-coc* (cf. Middle English *veder-coc*) seems as good as one can do (‘Das Geschlecht’, p. 324). At p. 108 above I discuss how Trautmann’s solution is reinforced by grammatical gender.

²⁶ Riddles 88 and 93 both describe an ink well. Recognition of that item as the correct answer to these riddles rests on one’s knowledge that ink wells were made from antlers. In Riddle 88 (though not in Riddle 93), much is made of the prior experience of this ‘creature’ when it was alive and was one of two masculine ‘brothers’. The allusion to a pair of antlers on the head of a deer cannot be missed. I therefore propose taking *heortes horn* ‘stag’s horn’ as the solution for Riddle 88 and *blac-horn*, the ordinary name for the ink well, as the solution for Riddle 93. Little depends on this distinction, however.

THE PROBLEM OF THE ENDING OF *THE WIFE'S LAMENT*

The poem known as *The Wife's Lament* has long been admired as one of the most evocative poems of Old English literature. It is also regarded as one of the most problematic.¹ Here I wish to address one noteworthy problem associated with that poem; namely, how to construe a passage of ten and a half lines at the poem's close (lines 42–52a), whether as the speaker's gnomic reflection on the sorrows of life or as her outright curse upon a man who has wronged her. Upon that point the interpretation of the narrative and its emotional arc chiefly depends. Resolving that issue in a manner that will win the assent of informed readers will require first of all a careful look at the exact phrasing of the text. As we shall see, however, philology alone cannot resolve the problem of how to construe either this particular passage or the poem as a whole.

I am grateful to two anonymous readers for *Speculum* for having made constructive comments on an earlier draft of this chapter. In addition, Joseph Harris and A. N. Doane offered comments that led to my awareness of several ways in which it could be improved.

¹ Almost everyone who has written on *The Wife's Lament* has found occasion to comment on its difficult, enigmatic, or grammatically ambiguous features. As Frederic G. Cassidy and Richard N. Ringler remark in their revision of *Bright's Old English Grammar and Reader*, 3rd edn (New York, 1971), 'Scholars are now pretty much agreed that the so-called *Wife's Lament* is a dramatic monologue spoken by a woman. They agree about little else' (p. 343). The introduction and textual notes to Cassidy's and Ringler's edition of the poem include no fewer than twelve statements that are followed by a question mark, leaving aside other editorial comments to the effect that particular aspects of the text are 'somewhat disconcerting' (n. to 42a–45a), 'very ambiguous' (n. to 45b–51a), 'very strange' (n. to 53a), or impossible to resolve (notes to 18b and 20a–21b). No other work of Old English literature that is included in that anthology comes close to presenting so many difficulties of interpretation.

It can only open up certain hermeneutic possibilities while virtually ruling out certain others. I therefore hope to develop a viable reading context for *The Wife's Lament* by directing attention to cursing as a social institution and a literary theme, both in the earlier Middle Ages in Europe and, as space permits, in other times and places. That part of the chapter may be of interest in its own right. By combining the methods of philology and historical anthropology, I hope to present an interpretation of *The Wife's Lament* that is both linguistically sound and historically plausible, even if it departs from a consensus of current critical opinion in its emphasis on the will to avenge as opposed to the virtue of stoic endurance. In passing, I will touch on points regarding the modern reception of Old English literature that, again, may be found of interest in their own right.

The poem should be introduced, although it is well known to specialists and has gained a place in the Old English canon.² *The Wife's Lament* stands out among the so-called elegies of the Exeter Book in that it is a dramatic monologue that is imagined to be spoken by an isolated, grief-stricken woman. Although in that regard it resembles the poem known as *Wulf and Eadwacer* (fols 100^v–101^r), *The Wife's Lament* (which occupies fol. 115^{r-v}) presents a more fully developed narrative of the speaker's past. To that extent it more closely resembles other Exeter Book elegies, including the longer and more philosophical poem known as *The Wanderer* (fols 76^v–78^r), which is set in the voice of an isolated, grief-hardened man.³ In addition, *The Wife's Lament* has been thought to have a deliberately enigmatic quality by which it modulates towards the riddle, a genre

² When preparing a new edition of John C. Pope's 1981 teaching anthology *Seven Old English Poems*, for example, R. D. Fulk added one poem only: *The Wife's Lament*. He explains that he did so on account of the poem's current place in the classroom, for 'the poem has in the past twenty years become so important to the Old English curriculum' (p. xi). The edition is now therefore known as *Eight Old English Poems* (New York, 2001).

³ Klinck offers a nuanced discussion of the genre of *The Wife's Lament* both as part of her introduction to that poem (pp. 49–54) and in a chapter on 'The Nature of Elegy in Old English' (pp. 223–51). In 'Elegy in Old English and Old Norse: A Problem in Literary History', in *The Old English Elegies: New Essays in Criticism and Research*, ed. by Martin Green (Rutherford, NJ, 1983), pp. 46–56, Joseph Harris traces *The Wife's Lament* and other Old English and Old Norse elegies back to an earlier common Germanic genre that had a relation to funeral lament. Matti Rissanen discusses many points of textual resemblance between *The Wife's Lament* and the other elegies in 'The Theme of "Exile" in *The Wife's Lament*', *NM*, 70 (1969), 90–104, focusing on how the relationship between the husband and wife is described in terms of the relationship of a lord and a retainer who is exiled from his master's service.

that is amply represented in the pages of the Exeter Book.⁴ Although it has none of the rhetorical features (such as a challenge to 'guess my name') that would identify it as a true riddle, still, anyone reading the poem is forced to enter into a kind of guessing game regarding who the speaker is, what she has experienced, and what her exact response to that experience is. It should therefore come as no surprise that different readers have arrived at radically different ideas concerning the most basic features of the poem's 'plot'.

The argument has sometimes been made, for example, that the speaker of *The Wife's Lament* is someone or something other than a woman, such as a man, a revenant, or a displaced pagan deity.⁵ There seems to me no convincing reason to question the speaker's gender, however, for it is established by a set of three feminine grammatical inflections (*gēomorre*, 1b; *mīnre* and *sylfre*, 2a) that are introduced at the start of the monologue as if at once to mark the speaker linguistically as female.⁶ For critics to deny the speaker's feminine gender on the grounds that dramatic monologues by women are not characteristic of the literature of this period would seem, these days, to represent a hermeneutic stance that is curiously impervious to the evidence of the text. As for the speaker's imputed ghostly or semi-divine character, there are no overt statements in the poem to the effect that the woman or anyone else who figures in the plot is other than a flesh-and-blood person. The landscape where she is forced to dwell is the essence of gloom, with caverns that are suggestive of ancient gravesites, and yet in the absence of explicit deaths or other thematic elements that would suggest an

⁴ Faye Walker-Pelkey, 'Frige hwæt ic hatte: "The Wife's Lament" as Riddle', *Papers on Language and Literature*, 28 (1992), 242–66, approaches the poem as an extended literary riddle and offers the solution 'sword'. However fanciful such a reading may seem, it has some codicological support in that the unique text of *The Wife's Lament* follows immediately upon Exeter Book Riddles 1–59 (fols 101^r–115^v) and shortly precedes another copy of Riddle 30 and then (with two other enigmatic texts) Riddles 60–95 (fols 122^v–130^v). Carole Hough, 'The Riddle of *The Wife's Lament* Line 34b', *ANQ*, 16.4 (2003), 5–8, suggests that *The Wife's Lament*, like the riddles, makes deliberate use of polysemous vocabulary. Later I will return to the question of the place of *The Wife's Lament* in the Exeter Book codex (pp. 205–06 below).

⁵ See Klinck, p. 49 and nn. 64, 65, and 67 on p. 69 for reference to studies along these lines. Two important ones are by A. N. Doane, 'Heathen Form and Christian Function in *The Wife's Lament*', *Medieval Studies*, 28 (1966), 77–91, and Elinor Lench, 'The Wife's Lament: A Poem of the Living Dead', *Comitatus*, 1 (1970), 3–23.

⁶ Here as elsewhere in this chapter, quotations of all Exeter Book poems, including *The Wife's Lament*, are from Muir. Quotations of Old English poems that are preserved in manuscripts other than the Exeter Book are from the appropriate volume of ASPR.

otherworldly dimension, there seems to be no strong reason to take these caves in any other but a literal sense.⁷ The consensus view that the speaker is a wronged woman emerges naturally from the monologue as a whole. The speaker tells of how the love between herself and a man has gone sour, leaving her with an acute consciousness of physical and emotional isolation. Situations like this are familiar in the literary representation of women in the early medieval period, when exogamy was the rule for young women of high status and when not all marriages and in-law relationships worked out ideally. No one legendary model for the anonymous woman of the poem has yet convincingly been found, and perhaps none need be sought for, but literary figures of her type are well known.⁸

⁷ Some readers have found reason to associate the speaker with the dead because of her use of the noun *eorðscraef* (28b, cf. 36b) to refer to her dwelling place, but that word need not mean 'grave' and is unlikely to do so here, as is noted by Joseph Harris, 'A Note on *eorðscraef*/*eorðsele* and Current Interpretations of *The Wife's Lament*', *ES*, 58 (1977), 204–08. Much of the pathos of the speaker's condition is that she lives a kind of living death in a place as cheerless as the grave, but she is not therefore to be regarded as a revenant. See the Corpus of Old English, s.v. *eorðscraef*; the *DOE*, s.v. *eorp-scræf*; and B-T, s.v. *eorp-scræf* and *scræf*. Paul Battles, 'Of Graves, Caves, and Subterranean Dwellings: *eorðscraef* and *eorðsele* in the *Wife's Lament*', *PQ*, 73 (1994), 267–86, agrees that the 'earth-house' is to be taken literally and speculates that what is denoted is what archaeologists refer to as a souterrain (an underground building), of which there are many examples in northern Britain and other parts of north-west Europe. A discerning analysis of the poem's physical setting is offered by P. R. Orton, 'The *Wife's Lament* and *Skírnismál*: Some Parallels', in *Úr Dölum til Dala*, ed. by Rory McTurk and Andrew Wawn, Leeds Texts and Monographs, n.s., 11 (Leeds, 1989), pp. 205–37 (pp. 209–15). Orton well addresses one point of recurrent interest regarding the text of *The Wife's Lament*, the reading of verse 15b, *her heard niman* as that verse stands in the manuscript. Following an earlier strain of criticism, Orton would reconstruct the beginning of this verse as *herh-eard*, interpreted as 'grove-dwelling', with the understanding that the initial simplex *hearg* or *hearh* refers to a place of pagan worship. Part of the pathos of the speaker's condition, in this view, is that she has been forced to live in a gloomy grove that, for Christian readers of this poem, would have been associated with accursed pagan rites. Although I find Orton's reading persuasive, it is adopted by neither Klinck nor Muir, and so I do not rely on it here.

⁸ Klinck, p. 53, summarizes the search for sources and analogues for the poet's representation of the woman with reference to the stories of Genoveva, Crescentia, and the wife of Offa I. Tantalizing though speculative is the attempt by Orton, 'The *Wife's Lament* and *Skírnismál*', to see the speaker of *The Wife's Lament* as a de-mythologized reflex of the giantess Gerðr of Old Norse eddic poetry. Robert Luyster, 'The *Wife's Lament* in the Context of Scandinavian Myth and Ritual', *PQ*, 77 (1998), 243–70, accepts Orton's argument and carries it a step further, seeing the Wife as a reflex of 'the quintessential Lady, Freyja', whose divine consort has been taken away in a 'magical ship' over the waves to 'the underworld realm of the dead'. Far less speculatively, Dorothy Ann Bray, 'A Woman's Loss and Lamentation: Heledd's

Similarly, despite occasional arguments to the effect that the speaker tells of a triangle involving a woman, her husband, and a male rival or usurper,⁹ there is good reason to accept the current consensus that only two main figures are involved, namely the woman and her estranged husband.¹⁰ Some hostility on the part of the woman's in-laws is mentioned, but there is no need for readers to import into the scene a male villain other than the husband, if indeed he is to be viewed in a villainous light, for he is perhaps to be regarded as the misguided tool of his malicious kin.

That the man in question is indeed the speaker's husband, and not a more casual friend or lover, is implied by the speaker's allusion to the vows of fidelity that the two have exchanged (21b–23). A marital relationship is confirmed by several of the nouns that are used to refer to the man, specifically *hlāford* 'lord, husband' (6a, 15a), *frēa* 'lord' (33a) and *wine* 'lord, friend, protector' (50b). The first of these epithets, *hlāford*, is well attested elsewhere in Old English in the sense of 'husband' (in addition to its usual sense of 'liege lord'), and the word is naturally to be taken in that sense here.¹¹ The other two nouns would equally naturally carry the same special sense in this context in addition to their more usual denotations.¹² That the man is to be regarded as of very high rank, and that he is indeed the prince or lord of his people, is indicated by the speaker's use of the noun *lēodfruma* 'leader of the people' (8a) to refer to him. This word could not possibly mean 'husband' but must refer to a chieftain, high lord, or king. It follows that the woman, too, as the wife of such a man, must have enjoyed a place near the top of the social hierarchy. That the couple's marriage was once one of genuine affection is made clear by many narrative details including the

Song and *The Wife's Lament*', *Neoph*, 79 (1995), 147–54, relates the Wife's grief to that of Heledd, in the Llywarch Hen cycle of early Welsh poetry, without developing a theory of the influence of one tradition on the other.

⁹ For discussion of this disputed point, see Klinck, p. 50 and n. 71 on p. 70.

¹⁰ As Fulk has remarked, 'the tendency of late [among scholars] has been to avoid multiplying characters and events', for 'the tale is simpler than the syntax in which it is expressed' (*Eight Old English Poems*, p. 122).

¹¹ See Klinck, p. 178, n. to lines 6–8, and Fulk, *Eight Old English Poems*, pp. 123–24, for reference to examples of this usage in legal documents. Note further Toller, s.v. *hlāford*, sense II.2.b: 'the master of a wife, a wife's lord and master, the husband'.

¹² Eve similarly addresses Adam as *frēa mīn* and *wine mīn* in the Old English poem *Genesis B*, verses 655a and 824b: *The Junius Manuscript*, ed. by George Philip Krapp, ASPR, 1 (New York, 1931), pp. 23 and 28, respectively.

woman's reference to her having found a man who was *ful gemæcne* 'completely suited' to her (18a), to their *frēondscipe* 'friendship, affection, love' (25a), and to her grief at being forced to endure the enmity of her *felalēofan* 'dearly loved one' (26a). Thus the woman addresses the man as both her husband and her lord. Despite her rancor, she speaks of him with some tenderness (he remains her *frēond* 'friend, kinsman, lover', 47b) as well as with the respect that is due him as the head of their household (he is her *wine*, 50b).

To round out this brief account of my guiding assumptions, I should state my agreement with most commentators in seeing no need to posit an allegorical meaning for the poem.¹³ Like all Old English writings that have come down to us, and particularly like all the contents of the Exeter Book, *The Wife's Lament* can only be understood within a Christian intellectual context. That much can be taken for granted. In addition, as Alain Renoir has suggested, the central action of the poem might be regarded as a textbook illustration of the New Testament assertion that the Lord *deposuit potentes de sede* (has put down the mighty from their thrones).¹⁴ If one adopts this approach, then the mighty one who is

¹³ See Klinck, pp. 59–60, for reference to studies by M. J. Swanton, W. F. Bolton, R. E. Kaske, and Margaret Goldsmith. To these citations may be added *Anglo-Saxon Poetry*, ed. and trans. by S. A. J. Bradley (London, 1982), pp. 382–84; and two studies by Shari Horner, 'En/closed Subjects: *The Wife's Lament* and the Culture of Early Medieval Female Monasticism', *Æstel*, 2 (1994), 45–61, repr. in *Old English Literature: Critical Essays*, ed. by R. M. Liuzza (New Haven, CT, 2002), pp. 381–91, and *The Discourse of Enclosure: Representing Women in Old English Literature* (Albany, NY, 2001), pp. 48–55. To clarify my own position, I do not mean to claim that a story that is set in the heroic past can have only a literal meaning. It could conceivably bear an allegorical sense as well. There is nothing to prevent readers of *The Wife's Lament* from reading it as an allegory of Christ's love for the Church, for example, or of an individual's love for Christ. The chief reason why such interpretations have not commanded general assent is that there are no clear signs that the poem is to be taken at anything other than its face value. An added factor is a lack of agreement among critics as to just what allegory is intended. Sceptics might argue that an allegorical reading of any of the Old English elegies (with the exception of *The Seafarer*, which is a special case) would involve an element of hermeneutic agility and, at key points, strain and would therefore be likely to be more revealing of the biases of the critic than of the content of the poem. On the other hand, hermeneutic agility and strain are inherent aspects of allegoresis and indeed constitute much of its appeal. I shall simply state, then, that it is not my purpose to seek out allegory in the poem that we call *The Wife's Lament*, for I prefer to see if the assumption that the poem is about a grief-stricken woman leads to a satisfactory conclusion.

¹⁴ Alain Renoir, 'Christian Inversion in *The Wife's Lament*', *SN*, 49 (1977), 19–24, making reference to Luke 1. 52, which forms part of the Magnificat, the Virgin Mary's words to her kinswoman Elizabeth in celebration of the fructifying powers of the Lord. This Gospel text in

put down from her high station is the female speaker, who recounts her own fall from a privileged status to a state of abject loneliness. All the same, the theme of a fall from grace is a literary commonplace that requires no allegorical exegesis.

Of greater importance for a culturally specific understanding of this poem, in my view, is the poem's setting in a past time that, while never identified, seems far more archaic than the late tenth-century period when the text was written down and, presumably, was being received by an audience of Anglo-Saxons.¹⁵ Like other Old English poems with which it has some affinities, including *Beowulf* and the Exeter Book poems *Wulf and Eadwacer*, *The Husband's Message*, *The Wanderer*, *Deor*, and *Widsith*, the poem is set in a world that seems like an Anglo-Saxon author's dream of his people's pre-Christian past. This is a fabulous northern world of lords and retainers, gifts and scop, wars and feuds, dynastic rivalries, arranged marriages, intrigues, and exiled victims of circumstance. It is a world that seems never to have heard of some prominent elements of the society that readers of the Exeter Book must have known firsthand, such as manuscript production, coinage, taxation, a complex hierarchy of clergy, a growing governmental bureaucracy, sad efforts at urban plumbing, and so forth. This primitive northern world of the imagination has been given a name — the Heroic Age — by modern scholars who have seen in it an analogue to the violent, passionate Bronze-Age world that is featured in the Homeric poems, which postdate the Bronze Age itself.¹⁶ Whatever we wish to call it, the period that was

turn is based on Hannah's prayer in celebration of the Lord in 1 Samuel 2. 1–10. While acknowledging the Christian context of *The Wife's Lament*, the reader should also keep in mind that this Old English poem differs dramatically in mood from Mary's exultant words of praise, as well as from the Old Testament passage upon which her words are largely based. If one were to read *The Wife's Lament* in a Marian context, one would expect to discover in it the hopeful message that just as the Lord casts down, he exalts the lowly. This, however, is not a point made by the exiled speaker.

¹⁵ I do not wish to enter into any controversy concerning the date of composition of *The Wife's Lament*. The extant text, which is a fair copy, can be dated to c. 975 on palaeographical grounds. There is little point in speculating about possible prior versions.

¹⁶ H. Munro Chadwick, *The Heroic Age* (Cambridge, 1912). H. Munro Chadwick and N. Kershaw Chadwick also make key use of that term in their comprehensive study *The Growth of Literature*, vol. 1: *The Ancient Literatures of Europe* (Cambridge, 1932). In the present book, I use the term 'Heroic Age' to refer to a period of the past as conceptualized by Chadwick on the basis of references in the literatures of the Germanic peoples. I use that term because it remains of heuristic value; I make no assumptions as to whether that period ever 'really existed' as such, or was ever conceived of in a systematic manner before the modern era.

roughly coterminous with the fall of Rome and the concurrent great migrations of the Germanic peoples of Europe (that is, the late Iron Age period *c.* AD 400–650) seems to have been the favourite ‘once upon a time’ of the Anglo-Saxon secular aristocracy. To judge from their extant heroic and elegiac literature, the Anglo-Saxons never ceased being fascinated by stories of their grander and more brutal ancestors. They must have brewed from those tales a heady mixture of history, nostalgia, escapism, moral philosophy, and genealogical pride, as well as a sense of their own enlightened spirituality when measuring themselves against the people of former times.

In her fine edition and analysis of the Old English elegies, Anne L. Klinck gives a helpful summary of the poem’s plot, which is essentially the story of the woman’s life.¹⁷ In all essentials Klinck’s view of the action is in accord with Karl Wentersdorf’s account as set forth in a substantial article published in *Speculum* in 1981.¹⁸ Her account is in harmony with most other recent commentary, as well, and it is adopted here in abridged form as the basis of subsequent discussion.¹⁹

After a conventional opening of the ‘elegiac’ type (lines 1–5), the narrator of the poem declares that her present troubles began when her husband went abroad (lines 6–7a) — for unspecified reasons. She set off to seek *folgað*, a place in someone’s household, because she was left friendless and forlorn (lines 11–14a). The man’s kin began to plot to keep husband and wife as far apart as possible — again, for unspecified reasons. The husband then cruelly commands his wife to be seized. No one intercedes on his wife’s behalf because she has ‘few friends in this country’ (line 16). She has the unhappy experience of finding the man who had seemed so compatible to her hiding his thoughts under a cheerful demeanor. She laments that their love and their vows are broken (lines 21b–25a). She is commanded to dwell in a cave in the woods, a dismal place, where, afflicted with ‘longing’, she compares her own wretched state with the happier lot of lovers who are united (lines 27–41). The poem ends with a cry that speaks for all unhappy lovers: ‘Woe to him who must with longing wait for his dear one!’

The preceding abridgment omits, among other things, Klinck’s account of lines 42–50a, for the interpretation of that passage is the problem that I wish to

¹⁷ Klinck, pp. 50–51.

¹⁸ Karl P. Wentersdorf, ‘The Situation of the Narrator in the Old English *Wife’s Lament*’, *Speculum*, 56 (1981), 492–516 (esp. pp. 515–16), repr. with slight changes in *Old English Shorter Poems: Basic Readings*, ed. by Katherine O’Brien O’Keeffe (New York, 1994), pp. 357–92.

¹⁹ The present quotation includes some silent deletions. The reader is invited to consult Klinck’s full paraphrase for details that are omitted here.

address.²⁰ Given the difficulty of understanding the literal import of the speaker's closing words, there is clearly room for conflicting views concerning how that woman is imagined to be responding emotionally to the trauma she has experienced. Here then is the text of the last twelve lines of the poem as presented by Bernard J. Muir in his recent edition of the Exeter Book.²¹ So as not to prejudice the argument, I will not yet offer a continuous translation of the passage.²² As in all modern editions of Old English poetry, the punctuation is editorial and indicates one possible way of construing the lines, not the only way.²³

A scyle geong mon wesan geomormod,
heard heortan geboht, swylce habban sceal
bliþe gebæro, eac þon breostceare,
45 sinsorgna gedreag, sy æt him sylfum gelong
eal his worulde wyn, sy ful wide fah
feorres folclondes, þæt min freond siteð
under stanhliþe storme behrimed,
wine werigmod, wætre beflowen
50 on dreorsele. Dreogeð se min wine
micle modceare — he gemon to oft
wynlicran wic. Wa bið þam þe sceal
of langoþe leofes abidan.

Arriving at an acceptable reading of these lines will require the reader's patience for the next few paragraphs, for some philological niceties are at stake. These involve noun or pronoun reference, the function of the subjunctive mood in which certain verbs are cast, and the use of the present tense of OE verbs to denote futurity.

²⁰ So as not to seem to be suppressing relevant information, I give that part of Klinck's summary here: 'Here she reflects that the "young man" — her husband, not a third party — must have a hard heart and trouble under his cheerful demeanor (lines 42–45a), whether he enjoys good fortune (lines 45b–46a) or ill (lines 46b–50a). The latter possibility she elaborates on, imagining for her husband a situation reminiscent of her own (lines 47b–52a)' (p. 51).

²¹ Muir, I, 329–30. Among the plates preceding her edition, Klinck provides facsimile images of the recto and verso of Exeter Book fol. 115, which contains the whole of *The Wife's Lament*.

²² Readers unfamiliar with Old English may consult any of the available translations, though they are advised not to accept any version as definitive. The paraphrase that I will eventually offer (at p. 201 below) will be justified in due course.

²³ For example, Roy F. Leslie in his edition, *Three Old English Elegies: The Wife's Lament, The Husband's Message, The Ruin*, 2nd edn (Exeter, 1988), p. 48, begins a new sentence with *Sy* in verse 45b.

The first problem to be resolved is the meaning of the noun *mon* in the first verse, *Ā scyle geong mon*. That word (in OE variously spelled *monn*, *man*, and *mann*) is inherently ambiguous.²⁴ It can denote either a person of the male sex (as in modern English ‘man’) or a person of either sex, and it can also serve as an impersonal pronoun, like the German pronoun *man* or modern English ‘one’ in such a phrase as ‘one hopes that’. A glance at how the word is used elsewhere in the poem does not go far to resolve its ambiguity. In line 11, *þæs monnes magas* are clearly ‘that man’s kinsmen’. In line 27, however, the word is used in an impersonal way: *Heht mec mon wunian* ‘someone [or some people] commanded me to dwell’ (i.e. ‘I was made to dwell’). While in the main passage under discussion the word may have the primary sense ‘man, male person’, the secondary sense ‘person of either sex’ may also be present. Thus the ‘geong mon’ of verse 42a could be the female speaker herself, although not many have opted for that reading.²⁵

As for the verb *scyle*, morphologically it is the present subjunctive singular form of the verb *sculan* ‘to be obligated, fated, or duty bound’. There are three semantic possibilities. First, the word could have the sense of modern English ‘should’, as in the paraphrase ‘ever should a young man [or any young person] be sad at heart’, and so on. That is, the speaker might be saying that given circumstances like these, a young man (or woman) would have every reason to feel sad and bitter, or even has the right to feel sad and bitter.²⁶ Alternatively, the word could have the meaning ‘might’, as in the paraphrase ‘a young man [or any young person] might always have to be sad at heart’, and so on. Although that interpretation is grammatically acceptable, it seems to me a weak one in a rhetorical context such as this, when what is called for is emphatic closure to the speaker’s monologue rather than an indecisive statement as to what might or might not be the case. Let us then consider the third possibility. If the verb *scyle* is taken as a hortatory subjunctive, then it must mean ‘let it must be’, if readers will excuse a paraphrase that sounds odd in modern English but that conveys with precision one possible sense of subjunctive *scyle* versus indicative *sceal*. In

²⁴ Bosworth and Toller, s.v. *mann*, sense I.

²⁵ Fulk adopts this solution (*Eight Old English Poems*, pp. 127–28), following a suggestion made by Levin L. Schücking, ‘Das angelsächsische Gedicht von der “Klage der Frau”’, *ZfdA*, 48 (1906), 436–49.

²⁶ Compare the use of the verb *scyle* in lines 111–12 of *The Seafarer*: ‘Scyle monna gehwylc mid gemete healdan / [lufan] wiþ leofne ond wið laþne bealo’, Muir, I, 233 (Everyone should observe moderation both in love for friends and in hatred for enemies). Here the subjunctive mood conveys a sense of moral obligation.

other words, the speaker could be calling down grief on the heads of people — members of the male sex, first and foremost — who act as her husband has done, as if to say ‘Would it were the case that they were always sad at heart!’²⁷

A related problem is the meaning of the verb *sȳ* that occurs twice in lines 45–46 in two parallel clauses. Morphologically that word is the present subjunctive singular form of the verb ‘to be’, and here it could mean either of two things. First, it could have the sense ‘if it be’ or ‘whether it be’, as in the paraphrase ‘whether it be that all his [or her] worldly joy depends on himself [or herself] alone, or whether it be that he [or she] is hated in some distant land’. If the word is taken in a hortatory sense, however, what it means is ‘let it be’, as in the paraphrase ‘Let all his [or her] worldly comfort depend on himself [or herself] alone! Let him [or her] be hated in some distant land!’ This vindictive meaning is in accord with the grammar of the subjunctive mood in such a wish as *sī mē dryhten frēond* ‘may the Lord be my friend’ (*The Dream of the Rood* 144b) or such a curse as *sȳ hē amansumod* ‘may he be excommunicated!’ or *bēon hīe awergode* ‘let them be cursed’, clauses that are commonly found in ecclesiastical censures, as we shall see.

As for the pronominal phrase *him sylfum* and the pronoun *his* in the clause *sȳ æt him sylfum gelong / eal his worulde wyn*, first and foremost they may be thought to refer to a person of the male sex (‘himself, his’), but once again, the possibility cannot be ruled out that they are used in a gender-neutral sense, just as the ‘male’ pronouns ‘he’, ‘his’, and ‘him’ are often used in a gender-neutral sense in modern English, although at the risk of striking some feminist sparks. The clause thus has some free play in it and cannot at once be rendered more precisely than ‘May all his (or her) worldly joy be dependent on himself (or herself) alone’.

A last question is how to interpret the three third-person singular present indicative verbs *sitedð* ‘he sits’ (47b), *drēogeð* ‘he suffers’ (50b), and *gemon* ‘he remembers’ (51b). While the other present indicative verbs that occur in this passage (the *sceal* and *bið* forms that figure in lines 43 and 52) are gnomic in function and denote necessary or habitual states of being, these verbs are not gnomic. They could refer either to the present state of affairs or to an imagined future time. If one construes the passage as referring to a future time when the husband, now himself an outcast, will look back on his former life with regret, then the

²⁷ This sense, ‘should have to’, is uppermost in the only other occurrence of *scyle* in the elegies, in line 74 of *The Seafarer*: ‘þæt he gewyrce, ær he on weg scyle’ (that he bring it about, before he should have to depart [in death]).

three verbs can be translated 'he will sit', 'he will suffer', and 'he will remember', respectively. This reading has the advantage of being in keeping with the rhetorical strategies of other Old English poems which feature a shift to a future time (sometimes apocalyptic in nature) as the work draws towards its close. Just such a temporal shift occurs towards the end of *The Wanderer*, for example, when a wise man of an imagined future age is imagined to be looking back upon the wasted remains of former civilizations. At that time, we are told, the wise man *gēondþenceð* 'will contemplate', *gemon* 'will remember', and *ācwīð* 'will say' (lines 88–91), speaking from a vantage point that no person of the present age can attain.²⁸ If one reads the last part of *The Wife's Lament* in an analogous manner, then the conjunction *þat* that introduces verses 47b–50a is best taken as introducing a clause of result. The wife appears to be hoping that a certain state of affairs *will come to pass* so that at some future time her husband *will sit* in sorrowful remembrance.

Thankfully, the last one-and-one-half lines of the passage are tied in no grammatical knots. The verses have gnomic force, and what they mean, to quote the paraphrase by Klinck that is cited above, is 'Woe to him who must with longing wait for his dear one!' Alternatively, a translator might want to shift to the plural number so as to avoid the gender-specific qualities of the third-person singular pronoun 'him'; the line could then be rendered 'Woe to those who must wait in longing for their loved one', or better yet, since the grammar here is gnomic and not hortatory, 'Sad are those who must wait in longing for their loved one'. The meaning of the end of the speaker's monologue is thus transparent even though the preceding ten and a half lines present a host of difficulties.

²⁸ Krapp and Dobbie, p. 136. The notion that these verbs are used here in a future sense either is not entertained by most translators or, if entertained by them, is rejected in favour of a different understanding of the passage. Bradley, for example, translates the verbs in the present tense, or even in the past perfect: 'He who has sagely reflected upon this foundation and, wise at heart, deeply contemplates this dark life, often recalls a multitude of violent assaults, and utters these words: "Where has gone the steed?"' (*Anglo-Saxon Poetry*, p. 324). A strong case can be made, however, that the person whose imagined reflections are featured here is not just any person at all, but is the same man as the *gleaw hāle* 'wise man' of verse 73a of the poem. This person is imagined to be living in an age 'when all the weal of this world stands waste' (line 74) — in other words, at a future apocalyptic time when the whole earth will resemble the ruins of former civilizations. The wise speaker thus 'will recall' past glories and 'will utter' words like these. Stanley B. Greenfield has made a convincing case for this reading in 'The Wife's Lament Reconsidered', *PMLA*, 68 (1953), 907–12, repr. in his *Hero and Exile: The Art of Old English Poetry*, ed. by George Hardin Brown (London, 1989), pp. 149–54 (at pp. 153–54).

To sum up this part of my discussion, there are two schools of thought about lines 42–52a. They could be called the ‘genteel’ versus the ‘vindictive’ school. According to the ‘genteel’ interpretation, these lines, too, are gnomic. They express philosophical resignation concerning the lot of unhappy lovers of either sex who are forced to endure the absence of their beloved. According to the rival ‘vindictive’ view, the woman speaks a curse. With bitter but unbroken spirit, she heartily wishes that her husband were just as miserable as she is, and she visualizes him suffering thus in some future time.

Although individual readers have lined up on either side of this crucial divide, the ‘genteel’ view has long ruled the field. On that side are most editors, including George Krapp and E. V. K. Dobbie, Roy Leslie, Bruce Mitchell and Fred Robinson, Anne Klinck, and John Pope and R. D. Fulk.²⁹ Among commentators who have adopted this stance are Thomas M. Davis, Douglas D. Short, Karl Wentersdorf, Martin Green, Lois Bragg, Dorothy Ann Bray, and Alaric Hall, following a line of interpretation that goes back to W. W. Lawrence writing in 1908.³⁰ Translators who have accepted this view include N. Kershaw, Gavin Bone, Charles W. Kennedy, Richard Hamer, and Kevin Crossley-Holland.³¹

²⁹ Krapp and Dobbie, pp. lvii–lix; Leslie, *Three Old English Elegies*, pp. 8, 57–58; Bruce Mitchell and Fred C. Robinson, *A Guide to Old English*, 6th edn (Oxford, 2001), pp. 264–67; Klinck, pp. 50–51 and 185–87 (n. to lines 42–47a); and Fulk, *Eight Old English Poems*, pp. 127–28. Here and elsewhere there is no need for me to cite every author who has written on relevant aspects of *The Wife's Lament*. Klinck, pp. 49–54 and 177–88, provides judicious guidance to the various controversies that have surfaced in the critical literature, while Muir, II, 756–882, offers a comprehensive bibliography of critical studies of Exeter Book poems. Jerome Mandel, *Alternative Readings in Old English Poetry* (New York, 1987), also offers an overview of interpretations of the poem (pp. 149–55) before presenting his own views (pp. 155–73).

³⁰ Thomas M. Davis, ‘Another View of *The Wife's Lament*’, *Papers on English Language and Literature*, 1 (1965), 291–305 (at pp. 302–04); Douglas D. Short, ‘The Old English *Wife's Lament*’, *NM*, 71 (1970), 585–603 (at pp. 600–02); Wentersdorf, ‘Situation of the Narrator’, pp. 515–16; Martin Green, ‘Time, Memory, and Elegy in *The Wife's Lament*’, in *Old English Elegies*, ed. by Green, pp. 123–32 (esp. at pp. 129–30); Lois Bragg, *The Lyric Speakers of Old English Poetry* (Rutherford, NJ, 1991), pp. 95–96; Bray, ‘Woman's Loss and Lamentation’, p. 150; Alaric Hall, ‘The Images and Structure of *The Wife's Lament*’, *Leeds Studies in English*, n.s., 33 (2002), 1–29 (at pp. 18–19); W. W. Lawrence, ‘The Banished Wife's Lament’, *MPh*, 5 (1908), 387–405 (at pp. 388–89).

³¹ N. Kershaw, *Anglo-Saxon and Norse Poems* (Cambridge, 1922), pp. 32–35; Gavin Bone, *Anglo-Saxon Poetry* (Oxford, 1943), pp. 64–65; Charles W. Kennedy, *An Anthology of Old English Poetry* (New York, 1960), pp. 10–11; Richard Hamer, *A Choice of Anglo-Saxon Verse* (London, 1970), pp. 71–75; and Kevin Crossley-Holland, *The Anglo-Saxon World* (Woodbridge, Suffolk, 1982), pp. 52–53.

According to this view, the woman is remarkable for her dignified passivity. She is homeless and exposed to the elements, but also resigned to her lot and noble in her suffering.³²

Bruce Mitchell and Fred C. Robinson have advanced an influential statement of the 'genteel' position in the headnote to their teaching edition of the poem: 'The final section (ll. 42–53) seems to be the wife's speculations as to the husband's present circumstances and her assurances to herself that he must feel as sad as she does when he recalls their former life together.'³³ In their textual note to lines 42–52, Mitchell and Robinson reiterate the point that the woman is thinking of her husband with sympathetic longing and affection: 'Here the speaker seems [. . .] to assure herself that whatever his circumstances he will certainly be sharing her sorrow over their separation.' According to this view, the woman is comforted at the thought that her husband is just as sad to be parted from her as she is to be bereft of him. The bond between the two lovers is thus seen to be strong enough to withstand the efforts of her in-laws to cause an estrangement.

Although this reading is consistent with one possible construction of the grammar of the closing passage, it is difficult to reconcile with other parts of the woman's monologue. Faith in the mutual goodwill of the husband and the wife would be on more secure footing if the woman did not elsewhere complain that their former love has turned to enmity on his side:³⁴

Is nu swa hit na wære,
 freondscipe uncer. Sceal ic feor ge neah
 mines felaleofan fæhðu dreogan. (lines 24–26)

³² As Alain Renoir has pointed out in 'A Reading Context for *The Wife's Lament*', in *Anglo-Saxon Poetry: Essays in Appreciation for John C. McGalliard*, ed. by Lewis E. Nicholson and Dolores Warwick Frese (South Bend, IN, 1975), pp. 224–41, the woman of *The Wife's Lament* is thus to be numbered among many long-suffering women known to us from Germanic antiquity. Renoir connects the poem to a Germanic tradition of suffering women that includes Guthrun, Brynhild, and the Hildeburh of *Beowulf*. Joyce Hill, however, challenges common assumptions concerning the 'sad woman' stereotype in her essay "'Pæt wæs geomuru ides!" A Female Stereotype Examined', in *New Readings on Women in Old English Literature*, ed. by Helen Damico and Alexandra H. Olsen (Bloomington, IN, 1990), pp. 235–47.

³³ *Guide to Old English*, ed. by Mitchell and Robinson, p. 266.

³⁴ Although Muir provides the past participle *fornumen* (meaning 'swept away') between square brackets after *nū* 'now' in 24a, most editors refrain from emending that line despite what seems to be its defective metre. The grammar is without fault, and rhetorically this very short verse is highly effective as it stands. I therefore let the manuscript reading stand, following Klinck's edition (at pp. 93–94) rather than Muir's in that regard.

(Now it is as if it our love had never been. Far or near, I must suffer the enmity of my dearly loved one.)

In view of this unambiguous reference to the husband's enmity, it is not surprising that some readers have failed to be persuaded by a 'genteel' reading of lines 42–53.

Lack of ambiguity, like beauty, can of course reside in the eye of the beholder. Not all readers are in agreement that the word *fæhðu* in the passage just quoted refers to hostility on the part of the husband. One married couple who have recently written on the poem, for example, prefer to read these same lines as 'a poignant description of the former unity of husband and wife' rather than a statement of regret at how the husband has violated his former vows.³⁵ Interpreting *fæhðu* as an allusion to a feud from which the husband, too, has suffered,³⁶ these commentators see the picture that the speaker draws of her husband sitting in miserable circumstances as 'piteous'. They conclude: 'This and other details which show the woman's strong sense of being part of a couple who belong together underline how painful is the physical separation that they now have to endure.'³⁷ While such a conclusion can be accepted as far as the woman is concerned, it remains speculative in regard to the man. Very little information is given us about the husband and what he is experiencing either physically or emotionally. As for interpreting the woman's last statement in the passage quoted above as meaning 'Now I have to suffer the feud that is directed against my husband', one must question any philological leap that converts what would seem to be the unproblematic possessive genitive construction *mīnes felalēofan fæhðu*

³⁵ Fiona Gameson and Richard Gameson, 'Wulf and Eadwacer, *The Wife's Lament*, and the Discovery of the Individual in Old English Verse', in *Studies in English Language and Literature* [. . .] in Honour of E. G. Stanley, ed. by M. J. Toswell and E. M. Tyler (London, 1996), pp. 457–74 (p. 461).

³⁶ These authors follow an interpretation of *fæhðu* that is advocated by Leslie, among others. Leslie claims that the noun *fæhp* (or *fæhðu*) is used elsewhere in Old English only to refer to a feud between two men and not hostility between a husband and wife (*Three Old English Elegies*, pp. 6–7). Such a view is unnecessarily restrictive. As Jane Chance has pointed out in *Woman as Hero in Old English Literature* (Syracuse, NY, 1986), 'the same word is also used by the *Beowulf*-poet for the vendetta between Grendel's Mother and Hrothgar' (p. 91). Especially since the man in *The Wife's Lament* is both the woman's husband (*hlāford*, etc.) and her liege-lord (*lēodfruma*, etc.), she is bound to him both by ties of love and by the mutual obligations that bind a retainer to his lord. The word *fæhðu* thus naturally refers to his hostile behaviour in abandoning her to the mercy of others.

³⁷ Gameson and Gameson, 'Wulf and Eadwacer', p. 464.

‘my husband’s enmity’ into a different meaning,³⁸ especially seeing that the phrase in question follows immediately after a statement that the couple’s love has gone sour.

The ‘vindictive’ or ‘curse’ approach, which has fewer advocates than the genteel one, goes back to Fritz Roeder writing in 1899. Roeder, however, postulated a third party against whom the curse was directed. He thus sustained the idea that the woman and her husband were still bound to one another by strong bonds of affection.³⁹ In an article published in 1953, in the course of advocating a soft version of the ‘curse’ interpretation, Stanley B. Greenfield rejected Roeder’s ‘third party’ theory in favour of the view that lines 42–52a are directed against the husband. In his view, these lines ‘represent the wife’s wish (a milder form of curse) that her husband, because of his cruelty to her, may endure an exile’s tribulations so that by direct experience he may come to understand emotionally the misery and suffering he has caused her’.⁴⁰ In 1966 and again in 1986, however, Greenfield retracted that view and joined the genteel majority.⁴¹ Also in 1966, however, A. N. Doane made a strong case that with their sudden shift

³⁸ Compare *metudes miltse* ‘the Lord’s mercy’ (*Wanderer* 2a), *Geates frige* ‘Geat’s embraces’ (*Deor* 15b), and *þæs monnes mǣgas* ‘that man’s kinsmen’ (*The Wife’s Lament* 11), to cite three examples drawn from the Exeter Book elegies.

³⁹ Fritz Roeder, *Die Familie bei den Angelsachsen*, vol. 1: *Mann und Frau*, Studien zur englischen Philologie, 4 (Halle, 1899), pp. 112–19. Francis P. Magoun, Jr, titles this section of the poem ‘Closing Malediction’ in his student edition *The Anglo-Saxon Poems in Bright’s Anglo-Saxon Reader* (Cambridge, MA, 1956), p. 28. While he includes no commentary justifying this phrase, he thus implicitly accepts Roeder’s argument. J. A. Ward, ‘*The Wife’s Lament*: An Interpretation’, *JEGP*, 59 (1960), 26–33, following this approach, concludes that the curse is directed at someone other than the husband (‘possibly the leader of the rebellious forces who overthrew the lord’, p. 32) despite the lack of overt reference to such a person and despite misgivings that ‘my argument seems to collapse’ on account of the ‘apparently clear-cut reference to “the enmity of my very dear one”’ in verses 25b–26 (p. 30).

⁴⁰ Greenfield, ‘*Wife’s Lament Reconsidered*’, in *Hero and Exile*, pp. 149–50. Fulk states that the passage in question is now generally read as gnomic rather than vituperative in nature ‘since such a reading [the ‘curse’ reading] entails the introduction of a previously unmentioned person’ (*Eight Old English Poems*, p. 127). This latter statement may once have been accurate but is no longer so, for Greenfield rejects the notion that a third party is introduced, while Chance (note 43 below) does not postulate that anyone other than the husband is involved.

⁴¹ Stanley B. Greenfield, ‘The Old English Elegies’, in *Continuations and Beginnings: Studies in Old English Literature*, ed. by Eric G. Stanley (London, 1966), pp. 142–75 (at pp. 165–69); Greenfield and Daniel G. Calder, *A New Critical History of Old English Literature* (New York, 1986), pp. 292–94 and 301 (notes).

of grammatical mood, lines 42–53 of the poem have ‘all the earmarks of a formal curse’ of the kind for which he finds evidence in Old Norse saga literature. ‘The speaker is drawing miseries upon someone’s head, specifically her *own* miseries’, he concludes.⁴² The remainder of Doane’s argument (which involves identifying the speaker as a cast-off pagan deity who is angry at the new God) is intriguing but need not concern us here. More recently Jane Chance has kept open the case for the ‘curse’ interpretation while mounting an original argument that the woman is represented as a kind of ‘anti-scop’ who curses her ‘lord’ and husband rather than celebrating him as a deserving object of praise.⁴³ Her argument that the last lines of the poem constitute a literary form of a curse can be accepted (or rejected) regardless of how one views her thesis concerning the identity of the speaker. In addition to this handful of critical studies, a handful of translations adopt the ‘vindictive’ view. When quoting the poem as a specimen text in his survey *Old English Literature*, for example, Michael Alexander has the woman curse her husband in no uncertain terms.⁴⁴ Other translators who have favoured the ‘curse’ approach are R. K. Gordon, S. A. J. Bradley, and Burton Raffel.⁴⁵ Not all the translators who adopt this stance are in agreement with one another, however, concerning the vehemence with which the woman’s words are spoken or the crucial question of who is the recipient of the curse. Bradley, for example, following Roeder’s approach, conceives of the woman as ‘betrayed by an intimate companion’ (not the husband) who merits the curse.⁴⁶ Raffel, also pursuing the third-party approach, reads such a plot into verse 15a, *Hēt mec hlāford mīn*. Instead of translating that line in what would seem to be its straightforward sense, ‘My lord/husband commanded me’, he arrives at the inventive translation

⁴² Doane, ‘Heathen Form and Christian Function’, pp. 80–81.

⁴³ Chance, *Woman as Hero*, ch. 6 (‘The Errant Woman as Scop in *Wulf and Eadwacer* and *The Wife’s Lament*’), pp. 81–94 (at pp. 90–93).

⁴⁴ Michael Alexander, *Old English Literature* (London, 1983), p. 127. Alexander’s translation (too free to be a reliable guide to this passage) is included in his anthology *The Earliest English Poems: A Bilingual Edition* (Berkeley, CA, 1970), pp. 108–11.

⁴⁵ R. K. Gordon, *Anglo-Saxon Poetry*, 2nd edn (London, 1954), pp. 79–80; *Anglo-Saxon Poetry*, ed. and trans. by Bradley, pp. 382–85; and Burton Raffel, *Poems and Prose from the Old English*, ed. by Alexandra H. Olsen and Burton Raffel (New Haven, CT, 1998), pp. 14–15. Bradley departs from Gordon and other translators in suggesting that an Anglo-Saxon Christian audience would have understood the poem in terms of an allegory whereby the woman represents Zion, the soul, or the Church.

⁴⁶ *Anglo-Saxon Poetry*, ed. and trans. by Bradley, p. 382.

‘My *new* lord sent me’ (my italics), thereby creating a villain where none had been in evidence before.⁴⁷

Notable among recent scholars who hold to the vindictive view is Barrie Ruth Straus. In her 1981 article ‘Women’s Words as Weapons: Speech as Action in *The Wife’s Lament*’, Straus draws on speech-act theory to argue that the woman does not passively accept her fate. Rather, she is an active agent in the drama of her life, first telling her story in her own words and then calling down a curse on the head of the man (or the heads of the people) who have been the cause of her suffering.⁴⁸ Straus cites very little evidence to support her view, however. Her position seems to be that the ‘curse’ reading is self-evident: ‘It is perfectly consistent for the speaker to end her story by wishing on others that unhappiness which she has described in such powerful tones throughout the poem. And this requires no explanation.’⁴⁹ What else would a jilted woman want to do, Straus implies, other than bring down hell and damnation on the man who had forsaken her?

While such a reading may strike a responsive chord in some quarters, it still requires evidential support. My main purpose in this chapter is to show grounds for favouring such an approach. Unfortunately, philological evidence can only take us so far, for key elements of the grammar of the text are ambiguous and can be taken to favour either of two irreconcilable interpretations. What I therefore propose to do is to show that the ‘curse’ approach has strong contextual support in addition to being philologically sound. In order to do this I will first offer a historical overview of cursing as both a social practice and a literary phenomenon with particular attention to evidence from Anglo-Saxon England. Returning to the textual crux that is my starting point, I will then offer what I believe to be an acceptable translation of the lines in question before concluding with a few remarks regarding the poem’s volatile modern reception. While granting that some of the disagreements that surface in the modern reception of the poem may have their origin in purposeful ambiguities in the original text, I hope to render so plausible the idea that the speaker is uttering a curse upon her husband that there is no need for modern readers either to conjure her wrath away or to seek out a different object for it. Taking such a view of the poem, I believe, will help to undermine two common stereotypes about Old English literature:

⁴⁷ Raffel, *Poems and Prose*, p. 14.

⁴⁸ Barry Ruth Straus, ‘Women’s Words as Weapons: Speech as Action in *The Wife’s Lament*’, *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 23 (1981), 268–85, repr. in *Old English Shorter Poems*, ed. by O’Brien O’Keeffe, pp. 335–56.

⁴⁹ Straus, ‘Women’s Words as Weapons’, p. 345.

namely, that it is both deaf to the voices of strong women and monotone in its call for resignation in the face of life's ills.

Cursing in Anglo-Saxon England

For the Anglo-Saxons as well as all peoples of the Book, the text that provided the chief precedent for acts of cursing was the Bible. Psalm 108 in particular offered a rhetorical model for ecclesiastical imprecations.⁵⁰ The following verses drawn from the psalmist's tirade against an unnamed enemy exemplify its vigorous rhetoric:

Fiant dies eius parvi episcopatum eius accipiat alter
sint filii eius pupilli et uxor eius vidua
instabiles vagentur liberi eius et mendicent
et quaerantur in parietinis suis.⁵¹

(May his days be few;
may another seize his goods!
May his children be fatherless,
and his wife a widow!
May his children wander about and beg;
may they be driven out of the ruins they inhabit!)⁵²

Although Psalm 108 was the text most likely to be incorporated into the ecclesiastical maledictions of the early Middle Ages, other psalms, too, were recited in whole or in part in conjunction with liturgical cursing. Most of the evidence for such cursing comes from the Continent. Lester Little points out, for example, that in the malediction of the Abbey of Saint-Wandrille, on the right bank of the Seine close to where the river enters the English Channel, the brothers are directed to sing seven psalms, the last of which is Psalm 108, before continuing with a set of prayers drawn from various parts of the psalms (e.g. 'May God

⁵⁰ The psalm is 108 in the Vulgate numbering, 109 in other versions. I follow the Vulgate numeration.

⁵¹ *Biblia sacra*, p. 911, col. 2, verses 8–10.

⁵² *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocrypha*, ed. by Herbert G. May and Bruce M. Metzger (New York, 1977), p. 743. The psalm is here numbered 109, as it generally is in modern editions. Other translations of the Bible in the present article are taken from this source, which departs at times from the Vulgate in particulars that do not affect my argument.

destroy them in the end!').⁵³ That the psalms were as well known in England as on the Continent is a point that needs no belabouring. All monks and clerics were expected to know and use all 150 psalms as part of the regular routine of prayer. In addition, the psalms were the chief vehicle of literacy in Latin. As George Hardin Brown has pointed out in a study of how the people of Anglo-Saxon England gained access to the world of Latin learning, 'The psalter served not only as the daily text in the recital of the monastic house and in the liturgy but, because of that central position, also served as both the educational primer and the most studied text of the Middle Ages'.⁵⁴ To be *psalteratus* meant to be literate in Latin. The passages of invective to be found in the psalms would therefore have been known by heart to many of the Anglo-Saxon regular clergy, who would have sung or recited them on many occasions and would have had practice in writing them out as well. Of course, those same biblical curses would have been familiar to the secular clergy and the literate laity, too, as well as to unlettered persons who would have heard them recited in either Latin or English or both tongues, for by the later Anglo-Saxon period, the text of the psalms was readily available in both Latin and the vernacular, particularly via Latin psalters that had been glossed in English.⁵⁵

The part of the Bible that provided the clergy with the principal authority for formal rites of cursing, however, was chs 27–28 of the book of Deuteronomy. Most of Deuteronomy is presented as a set of speeches uttered by Moses as part of his farewell address to Israel in the land of Moab. Together with the Decalogue from the book of Exodus, this book thus forms the main part of what Christians regarded as the Old Law (*sēo ealde ā*, or *Mōyses ā* 'Moses' Law'). Deuteronomy 27. 15–26 specifies the curses that will fall on a number of specific wrongdoers, including those who practise idolatry, those who dishonour their

⁵³ Lester K. Little, *Benedictine Maledictions: Liturgical Cursing in Romanesque France* (Ithaca, NY, 1993), p. 65.

⁵⁴ George Hardin Brown, 'The Dynamics of Literacy in Anglo-Saxon England', *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library*, 77 (1995), 109–42 (p. 122). See further Brown, 'The Psalms as the Foundation of Anglo-Saxon Learning', in *The Place of the Psalms in the Intellectual Culture of the Middle Ages*, ed. by Nancy van Deusen (Albany, NY, 1999), pp. 1–24.

⁵⁵ Drawing on information compiled by James L. Rosier, *The Vitellius Psalter*, Cornell Studies in English, 42 (Ithaca, NY, 1962), pp. xii–xiii, Greenfield and Calder, *A New Critical History*, note that 'fourteen glossed psalters appeared between 975 and 1075, six of them based primarily on the Gallican text and eight on the Roman' (p. 96). See further Phillip Pulsiano, 'Psalter Glosses', in *Blackwell Encyclopaedia*, pp. 380–81. In all, forty psalters and psalter fragments are known from Anglo-Saxon England.

father or mother, and those who remove boundary stones from their proper place. Every malediction concludes with the clause, 'And all the people shall say, "Amen"'. Following that passage is a long account of the blessings to be enjoyed by those who follow the will of God and the horrors that will afflict those who do not and are cursed. The list of imprecations begins as follows (Deut. 28. 15–19, paragraphing adjusted):

- 15 quod si audire nolueris vocem Domini Dei tui ut custodias et facias omnia mandata eius et caerimonias quas ego praecipio tibi hodie venient super te omnes maledictiones istae et adprehendent te
- 16 maledictus eris in civitate maledictus in agro
- 17 maledictum horreum tuum et maledictae reliquiae tuae
- 18 maledictus fructus ventris tui et fructus terrae tuae armenta bouum tuorum et greges ovium tuarum
- 19 maledictus eris ingrediens et maledictus egrediens.⁵⁶

In keeping with the bilingualism that was such a pervasive feature of late Anglo-Saxon textuality, this key passage is worth quoting also in its late West Saxon translation:

- 15 Gyf ðu nelt gehyran Drihtnes bebod, ðines Godes, ðe ic ðe to dæg bebeode, calle ðas wyrignyssa cumað ofer ðe ond ðe fordoð.
- 16 Beo ðu awyriged binnan byrig ond butan.
- 17 Sy ðin bearn awyriged ond ðine lafa.
- 18 Sy þines innoðes wæstm awyriged ond ðines landes wæstm ond þinra nytena.
- 19 Beo ðu awyriged ingangende ond utgangende.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ *Biblia sacra*, p. 272. The corresponding Hebrew text is translated as follows in *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, p. 250: 'But if you will not obey the voice of the Lord your God or be careful to do all his commandments and his statutes which I command you this day, then all these curses shall come upon you and overtake you. Cursed shall you be in the city, and cursed shall you be in the field. Cursed shall be your basket and your kneading-trough. Cursed shall be the fruit of your body, and the fruit of your ground, the increase of your cattle, and the young of your flock. Cursed shall you be when you come in, and cursed shall you be when you go out.'

⁵⁷ *The Old English Version of the Heptateuch*, ed. by S. J. Crawford, EETS OS, 160 (Oxford, 1922; repr. 1997), p. 360. There is no need to provide a separate translation of the Old English passage, but the reader should note that verses 17–18 are handled somewhat differently in the three versions of Deut. 28. 15–19 quoted here. *Bearn* in verse 17 of the OE version means 'barn' (translating Lat. *horreum*); it is not the homonym that means 'son' or 'child'. *Lāfa* in the same verse means 'leftovers, gleanings' (translating Lat. *reliquiae*). In verse 18 the translator of the OE version uses the collective noun *nyten* 'domestic beasts' where the Vulgate spells out 'cattle' and 'sheep'.

Readers of *The Wife's Lament* will note that the grammar of verses 45b–47a of that Old English poem mirrors fairly closely the grammar of the two parallel phrases 'sy ðin bearn awyrgeð [. . .] sy þines innoðes wæstm awyrgeð' (may your barn be cursed [. . .] may the fruit of your womb be cursed) in the passage just quoted. In addition, those two clauses from Deuteronomy occur in close conjunction with the present indicative verbs *cumað* and *fordōð* in verse 15, used here in the future sense 'they will come over you' and 'they will destroy you'. The grammatical similarity between the closing part of *The Wife's Lament* and the 'curse' passage from Deuteronomy need not be ascribed to conscious literary modelling. Rather, it is likely to result from the Anglo-Saxon author's familiarity with a conventional rhetoric of cursing whose ultimate source is this biblical passage.

Since it formed part of Mosaic law, the book of Deuteronomy served the people of Anglo-Saxon England as both a rhetorical model and a foundation for their indigenous legal system. When King Alfred the Great (r. 871–99) compiled his remarkably comprehensive law code towards the end of the ninth century, he kept what he thought was worth saving from the laws of previous Anglo-Saxon kings, but he broke new ground by presenting those Germanic-style statutes as an extension of the words of Holy Writ. In section 49 of the preface to his laws, Alfred makes clear that all English statutory law is to be viewed as the fulfilment of Mosaic law as tempered by the teachings of Christ:

Pis sindan ða domas þe se ælmihtega God self sprecende wæs to Moyse ond him gebead to healdanne; ond siððan se āncenneda dryhtnes sunu ure God þæt is hælend Crist on middangeard cwom, he cwæð ðæt he ne come no ðas bebodu to breccanne ne to forbeodanne, ac mid eallum godum to ecanne, ond mildheortnessee ond eaðmodnesse he lærde.⁵⁸

(These are the laws that God Almighty himself spoke to Moses, and commanded him to keep; and when the only begotten son of the lord our God, that is, the Saviour Christ, came into the world, he said that he came not to break these commandments or to countermand them, but to extend them with all things good; and he taught mercy and humility.)

⁵⁸ *Die Gesetze der Angelsachsen*, ed. by Felix Liebermann, 3 vols (Halle, 1903–16), 1 (1903), 42 (MS E), my punctuation. *The Laws of the Earliest English Kings*, ed. and trans. by F. L. Attenborough (Cambridge, 1922), omits almost this whole preface on the astonishing grounds that it has 'no bearing on Anglo-Saxon law' (p. 35). Allen J. Frantzen, *King Alfred* (Boston, MA, 1986), rightly terms Attenborough's editorial practice 'dismaying' in this regard. He finds 'incomprehensible' the fact that this 'extremely important and interesting material' is unavailable to a general reading audience in its entirety (p. 14).

King Alfred in effect proclaimed Mosaic law, including the passages of Deuteronomy cited here, to be the *fons et origo* of the composite law code that he was issuing for the benefit of a people whom he seems to have regarded as a vehicle of God's grace on earth. Not only King Alfred's law code but also his programme of translation of important books from Latin into English (including Psalms as one key text) confirms his purpose in this regard, for as Patrick Wormald points out, 'the king's translations repeatedly categorized Holy Writ as "The Law" (*seo æ*)'.⁵⁹

Together with excerpts from Psalms, the book of Deuteronomy thus naturally served as a model for the formulas and rituals of excommunication practised by the Anglo-Saxon Church. These rites are unlikely to have differed significantly from the ones that Little has discussed with reference to Romanesque France. In general, during the Middle Ages it was customary for the Church to curse 'by bell, book, and candle', using its solemn authority to shut the door on those whom it chose to regard as beyond redemption. That is, the ceremony proceeded by bell, to call attention to the ceremony and to toll the sinner's spiritual death; by book, as a source of the appropriate liturgical texts and also, at the end of the ceremony, to be closed in a gesture of finality as if closing the book of life; and by candle, for the act of snuffing out a candle added another dramatic symbol to the proceedings.⁶⁰ Ecclesiastical cursing was of two kinds, the lesser and the greater. Those persons who suffered minor excommunication were excluded from Communion, while those who fell afoul of the full power of the Church became subject to what Frederick Pollock and F. W. Maitland call 'ecclesiastical outlawry' and became *ūtlagan Godes ond manna* 'outlaws before God and men'.⁶¹ As E. M. Trehearne remarks in a wide-ranging and informative

⁵⁹ Patrick Wormald, *The Making of English Law: King Alfred to the Twelfth Century* (Oxford, 1999), p. 429. For full discussion, see pp. 416–29 ('King Alfred and the Mosaic Tradition').

⁶⁰ F. Donald Logan, 'Excommunication', in *Medieval England*, pp. 281–82, states that the actual ceremony was seldom used: 'A study of over 16,000 excommunications in England reveals not one instance of the formal ceremony of anathema. Commonly the excommunicating official [. . .] would simply say, "I excommunicate you" (*excommunico te*)' (p. 282, col. A). It is not clear to me, however, on what basis one can judge what ceremony was or was not enacted in a given instance. Surely a scribe who was making a record of an act of excommunication would not normally write out the whole script of that rite.

⁶¹ F. Pollock and F. W. Maitland, *The History of English Law Before the Time of Edward I*, 2nd edn, 2 vols (Cambridge, 1898), I, 478; *The Laws of the Kings of England from Edmund to Henry I*, ed. by A. J. Robertson (Cambridge, 1925), pp. 176–77 (II Cnut 4 sec. 1) and 196 (II Cnut 39), respectively.

study of ecclesiastical cursing in Anglo-Saxon England, these phrases ‘suggest a degree of synonymity between the criminal in secular law and the offender against ecclesiastical law’.⁶² Punishment in either sphere, or two together, could take the form of ostracism.

As one possible model for English formulas of excommunication, Treharne cites a tenth-century text from the Continent (from Regino of Prüm’s *De ecclesiasticis disciplinis et religione Christiana*) that repeats with only slight omissions the phrasing of Deuteronomy 28. 16–19. In keeping with the purposes of this text, certain pronouns and verbs are converted from the prophetic second-person plural indicative mood (‘you will be’) to the hortatory third-person plural subjunctive mood (‘let them be!’). The subjunctive mood serves here as the grammatical vehicle of a speech act whereby a curse is assumed to take instant effect:

Sintque maledicti in civitate, maledicti in agro, maledictum horreum eorum, et maledictae reliquiae illorum, maledictus fructus ventris eorum, et fructus terrae illorum. Maledicti sint ingredientes, et maledicti sint egredientes.⁶³

(Let them be cursed in the city, and let them be cursed in the field! May their basket and their kneading troughs be cursed! Let the fruit of their womb be cursed, and the fruit of their ground! Let them be cursed when they come in, and cursed when they go out!)

Of special interest for its use of the vernacular is a pair of formulas for excommunication for theft that are written out in CCCC, MS 303, a twelfth-century manuscript produced at Rochester from earlier Old English materials including writings by the distinguished homilist Ælfric (c. 945–c. 1010). In keeping with the advanced state of literacy in late Anglo-Saxon England, these formulas were available to be performed in both Latin and English. While the two texts are too long to quote in their entirety, the central paragraph of the Old English one is representative of their vigorous rhetoric:

Beon hi awergode etende ond drincende! Beon hi awergode gangende ond sittende!
Beon hi awergode sprecende ond swigiande! Beon hi awergode waciene ond slæpende!
Beon hi awergode rowende ond ridende! Beon hi awergode hlehhende ond wepende!

⁶² E. M. Treharne, ‘A Unique Old English Formula for Excommunication from Cambridge, Corpus Christi College 303’, *ASE*, 24 (1995), 185–211 (p. 193). Treharne discusses the prevalence of liturgical cursing in Anglo-Saxon England and concludes that ‘this harshest of penalties may have played a more central role in Anglo-Saxon culture than previously recognized’ (p. 209).

⁶³ Treharne, ‘Unique Old English Formula’, p. 203.

Beon hi awergode on huse ond on æcere! Beon hi awergode on wætere ond on lande
ond on eallen steden!⁶⁴

(May they be cursed eating and drinking! May they be cursed walking and sitting! May
they be cursed speaking and being silent! May they be cursed waking and sleeping!
May they be cursed rowing and riding! May they be cursed laughing and weeping!
May they be cursed at home and in the field! May they be cursed on water and on land
and everywhere!)

As if it were directed to a listening audience, this text begins with a conventional homiletic address (*Men þa leofestan* 'dearly beloved, my dear people'). It ends, in two clauses that seem to be modelled upon Deuteronomy 27. 15–26, with instructions to the congregation to take an active part in the rite: 'Ealle folc cweðe: "Soð hit si, gewurpe þæt!"' (Let all the people say: 'May it be true! May it come to pass!'). Clearly these texts were meant for public performance before people who were expected to egg on the proceedings. In the light of texts like this, one can reasonably conclude that during the later Anglo-Saxon period, both the clergy and the laity would have been so habituated to the language of imprecation that they would have regarded the act of cursing as a normal and legitimate feature of their social world. Both the task of excommunicating individual sinners and the more general programme of purifying the land from sin were offices undertaken by the Church using a rhetoric of imprecation that derives largely from Holy Writ.

In addition to their role in the Church's rituals of purification, curses permeated the world of text making and were frequently embedded in legal documents.⁶⁵ Curses incorporated into charters and wills range in tone from the mild to the excoriating. A late tenth-century grant of land at Norton, co. Durham, to St Cuthbert's by a man named Ulfketel ends with the imprecation: 'Se ðe þis awende sy he ascyred from Godes dæle ond from eallum haligdome'⁶⁶ (May he who alters this be cut off from any part in God and from anything sacred!).

⁶⁴ *Die Gesetze der Angelsachsen*, ed. by Liebermann, I, 438 (sections 6–13). Cf. Treharne, 'Unique Old English Formula', p. 211. Thirteen Anglo-Saxon formulas of excommunication are included in Liebermann, I, 432–41, and an additional three texts are printed by Hans Sauer, 'Die Exkommunikationsriten aus Wulfstans Handbuch und Liebermanns Gesetze', in *Bright Is the Ring of Words: Festschrift für Horst Weinstock zum 65. Geburtstag*, ed. by Clausdirk Pollner and others, *Abhandlungen zur Sprache und Literatur*, 85 (Bonn, 1996), pp. 283–307.

⁶⁵ Note Brenda Danet and Bryna Bogoch, "'Whoever Alters This, May God Turn His Face from Him on the Day of Judgment': Curses in Anglo-Saxon Legal Documents,' *JAF*, 105 (1992), 132–65.

⁶⁶ *Anglo-Saxon Charters*, ed. by A. J. Robertson, 2nd edn (Cambridge, 1956), no. 68 (p. 140), = Sawyer no. 1661.

Slightly more elaborate is the curse that concludes a bequest drawn up by a noblewoman named Æthelflæd to the benefit of the Church of St Paul's, London, at a date between 1004 and 1014: 'And swa hwilc man swa þisne cwide awende, sy he Iudas gefere ðe urne drihten belewde on helle wite'⁶⁷ (And whatsoever person shall alter this bequest, may he be a companion of Judas, who betrayed our Lord, in the torment of hell!). A more elaborate double malediction forms the closing part of a bequest that was made sometime after 975 by a wealthy nobleman named Ælfhelm, who was evidently a faithful *minister* of King Edgar the Peaceful and a patron of Ramsey abbey. In addition to making provision for over a dozen estates and some scattered hides of land, Ælfhelm wills his longship to Ramsey, 'half for the abbot, and half for the community', in a bequest that might require an attitude adjustment on the part of modern persons whose concept of the medieval monastic life does not encompass Viking-style ships. Ælfhelm calls upon the king to be a faithful guarantor of the gift. An initial 'curse clause' that is introduced here is mitigated by the proleptic assurance that, of course, its provisions could not apply to the king. After signatures are added, the will concludes with a forthright call for the excommunication and damnation of anyone who alters its terms:

Se man se þe minne cwyde wende (buton þu hyt sy, leof, ond ic hæbbe geleanan þæt þu nelle), God afyrre hine of his rice buton he þe hraþor ongén wende; ond God ond ealle his halgan gehealde æ[l]cne þara þe þærto gefyrþryge þæt he standan mote.

[Endorsed]

Gif hwa æfre ænig þinc of þysum cwyde awende oþþe ætbrode, sy him godes ár ond his ece edlean æfre ætbroden, ond he næfre ne wurþe on his myltse gemet, ac he sy amansumod of þam gemanan ealra gecorenra Cristes heapa, ge nu ge on ecnysse, buton he þe hrædlicor þæt forlæte ond on riht eac eft gewende.⁶⁸

(That man who shall alter my will (unless it be you, Sire, and I am confident that you will not), may God drive him from his kingdom, unless he will quickly change it back again; and may God and all his saints maintain each of those who give their support that the will may stand.

[Endorsed]

If anyone ever alters or removes anything in this will, may God's grace and his eternal reward be taken from him forever, and may he never be found in his favour, but let him be excommunicated from the society of all Christ's chosen companies, both now and in eternity, unless he will quickly desist from that behaviour and also make full amends.)

⁶⁷ *Anglo-Saxon Wills*, ed. by Dorothy Whitelock (Cambridge, 1930), no. 23 (p. 66).

⁶⁸ *Anglo-Saxon Wills*, ed. by Whitelock, no. 13 (pp. 30–34); quotation from p. 34, text slightly normalized.

With its direct address to the king ('unless it be you, Sire'), this passage has the character of a textualized speech act. In many instances what the text of a will represents is the gist of a spoken declaration together with a record of the names of high-ranking persons who were present to witness it. The oral-performative basis of some legal curses is self-evident. An example is the following conclusion to a grant of land made by a lord named Æthelstan, who held the rank of ealdorman during the reign of King Æthelstan (924–39), to St Mary's at Abingdon:

Ond se arcebiscope Wulfhem ond ealla þa biscofes ond abbodes þe þer gesomnode wæron amansumeden fram Criste ond fram eallum Cristes gemænnes ond fram eallam cristendome þe æfre þas gife undyde oððe þis land gelytlede on læsu oððe on gemæru. Beo he ascyred ond gesceofen into helle grunde aa buten ende! Ond cwæþ eall þæt folc þe þer embstod, 'Sy hyt swa! Amen, amen.'⁶⁹

(And Archbishop Wulfhelm and all the bishops and abbots who were assembled there excommunicated from Christ and from all the fellowship of Christ and from the whole of Christendom anyone who should ever undo this grant or reduce this estate in pasture or in boundary. Let him be cut off and hurled into the abyss of hell forever without end! And all the people who were standing by said, 'So be it! Amen, amen.')

The rhetoric of this passage provides a vivid example of the medieval art of representing the oral in the written.⁷⁰ At first, what must have been an impressive public ceremony is evoked in the usual style of after-the-fact reporting: 'they excommunicated from Christ . . .'. Then, without any transition, direct speech is introduced as if the reader were present in the scene. The author of the document reiterates the curse as if he himself were the speaker: 'Let him [the offending person] be cut off and hurled! . . .'⁷¹ Later the style of indirect speech

⁶⁹ *Anglo-Saxon Charters*, ed. by Robertson, no. 22 (p. 44), my punctuation, = Sawyer no. 1208. On the inflection of the verb *amānsumeden*, whose preterite indicative plural form would normally end in *-on*, see A. Campbell, *Old English Grammar* (Oxford, 1959), sections 735 (e, g) and 752.

⁷⁰ Michael T. Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record: England 1066–1307*, 2nd edn (Oxford, 1993), offers a nuanced discussion of oral residue in English laws dating from the period after the Conquest. For the period before the Conquest, see Patrick Wormald, 'Lex Scripta and Verbum Regis: Legislation and Germanic Kingship from Euric to Cnut', in *Early Medieval Kingship*, ed. by P. H. Sawyer and I. N. Wood (Leeds, 1977), pp. 105–38, and Wormald, *Making of English Law*, passim. On oral residue in wills, see Brenda Danet and Bryna Bogoch, 'From Oral Ceremony to Written Document: The Transitional Language of Anglo-Saxon Wills', *Language and Communication*, 12 (1992), 95–122.

⁷¹ Robertson's translation of this part of the passage ('He shall be cut off and hurled', *Anglo-Saxon Charters*, p. 45), though not inaccurate, effaces this shift into the subjunctive mood. A vital part of the rhetoric of the text is thereby obscured.

resumes: ‘And all the people who were standing by said “So be it! Amen, amen”.’ Through this shift of grammar from the indicative mood to the subjunctive and back again, the text thus simulates the oral performance that it reports and the curse is re-enacted for every present reader.⁷²

As well as being included in freestanding legal documents, curses were sometimes inscribed in books, particularly in the context of manumissions. Indeed, the prefatory pages of the Exeter Book itself are inscribed with a number of curses. They have nothing to do with the poetic contents of that compendium; they were simply added at various times because of the dignity of the book and the availability of some blank parchment. Still it is worth noting that curses were one of the first things that a medieval reader would have encountered upon picking up the Exeter Book. An example is the curse that is inscribed at the end of a manumission written out on folio 6^v. That document records that at the time when Bishop Osbern consecrated the Church of St Mary (apparently either St Mary’s at Tavistock or St Mary’s at Crediton), a man named Folcard freed one of his slaves, Agelwine, together with Agelwine’s children. The writer adds, ‘ond hæbbe he Godes curs ond ealra halgenna þe þis æfre undo’ (and if anyone ever undoes this, may he have the curse of God and all saints).⁷³ Very similar are the curses that are included in ten manumissions, written in eight hands, that were added at various times during the eleventh century to the first folio of a copy of the Gospels now catalogued as CCCC, MS 140. Items numbered 1, 5, 8, 9, and 10 of this front matter all include the same brief rhymed formula of cursing: ‘Crist hine ablende þe þis gewrit awende’⁷⁴ (May Christ strike him blind who alters this writ).

Yet another type of curse, the ‘book-theft’ curse, was inscribed into books to prevent their unauthorized removal from a library. In his chapter ‘The Donations of Leofric to Exeter’ that forms part of the Exeter Book facsimile volume, Max Förster provides a normalized version of a bilingual example that occurs in nine Anglo-Saxon manuscripts, most of which are now housed in the Bodleian Library, Oxford. The Latin text reads as follows:

⁷² As is discussed by Little, *Benedictine Maledictions*, p. 57.

⁷³ This set of manumissions can be consulted in the Exeter Book facsimile, fols 4^r–7^v.

⁷⁴ *The Old English Version of the Gospels*, ed. by R. M. Liuzza, vol. 1, EETS, 304 (Oxford, 1994), pp. xxvi–xxvii. Manumissions are also preserved on page 8 of a Bath cartulary included in CCCC, MS 111. Two of these (nos 1 and 4, printed in Liuzza, p. xxix) include a curse with almost the same wording as the preceding example: ‘Crist hine ablende þe þis æfre awende’ (May Christ strike him blind who ever changes this).

Hunc librum dedit Leofricus episcopus ecclesiæ sancti Petri apostoli in Exonia ad utilitatem successorum suorum. Si quis illum inde abstulerit, eternê subiaceat maledictioni. Fiat, fiat, fiat.⁷⁵

(Leofric gave this book to the church of St Peter the Apostle in Exeter for the use of his successors. If anyone removes it from there, may he be cursed forever. So be it, so be it, so be it!)

The Old English version differs only in slight details:

Ðas boc gef Leofric biscop sancto Petro ond eallum his æftergengum into Exancestre, Gode mid to þenienne. Ond gif hie ænig man utabrede, hæbbe he Godes curs ond wræððe calra halgena.

(Bishop Leofric gave this book to St Peter and to all his successors in Exeter, therewith to serve God. And if anyone takes it away, may he have God's curse and the wrath of all saints!)

A rhetorically heightened example of this kind of 'ex libris' inscription is the text that King Æthelstan entered into a copy of the Gospels (London, British Library, Cotton MSS, Otho B IX) that he presented to the shrine of St Cuthbert, then at Chester-le-Street, at the time of his northern military campaign of 934. The manuscript was destroyed by fire in 1731, but the inscription had previously been transcribed by the bibliophile Humphrey Wanley. The inscription reads as follows:

In nomine domini nostri Iesu Christi. Ic Æþelstan cyning selle þas boc into sancto Cuðberhte ond bebeode on Godes noman ond on þæs halgan weres þæt hio næfre nan monn of þisse stowe mid nanum facne ne reaflice ne afirre ne nane þara geofona þe ic to þisse stowe gedoo. Gif þonne hwelc monn to þæm dyrstig beo þæt he þisses hwæt breoce oððe wende, beo he scyldig wiþ God ond wiþ menn ond dæl neomende Iudases hletes Scariothes, ond on Domes dæge þæs egeslican cwides to geheranne ond to onfone: 'Discedite a me, maledicti, in ignem æternum!' et reliq.⁷⁶

(In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. I, King Athelstan, give this book to St Cuthbert's and command in the name of God and of that holy man that no one ever remove it from this foundation by any fraud or theft, nor [may anyone remove] any of the gifts that I present to this foundation. If anyone should be so foolish as to violate this [bequest] or change it in any way, may he be found guilty before God and men. May he share the lot of Judas Iscariot, so that at Judgement Day he will hear and receive the dread sentence: 'Depart from me into eternal fire, ye cursed ones!' etc.)

⁷⁵ M. Förster, 'The Donations of Leofric to Exeter', in the Exeter Book facsimile, pp. 10–32 (p. 11, n. 3). Both the Latin and the following OE text are cited from this source.

⁷⁶ *Anglo-Saxon Charters*, ed. by Robertson, no. 24 (p. 48), my punctuation, abbreviations expanded.

This vivid malediction was meant to protect both the Gospel book in which it is written and the other gifts that the King was offering as part of his effort to establish royal authority over the north. Inscriptions of this kind are analogous to any owners' marks meant to forestall theft or to assist in the recovery of lost property.

That the Church undertook cursing in times of political crisis as well as during ordinary times is shown by the entry in the *Peterborough Chronicle* (MS E of *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*) for the year 1137. That same entry shows, however, that the rite of excommunication was not always viewed with absolute respect, for it had little effect on nobles who scorned the Church's authority during the anarchy that characterized the reign of King Stephen: 'Þe biscepes ond lered men heom cusede æure, oc was heom naht þarof, for hi uueron al forcursæd ond forsuoren ond forloren'⁷⁷ (The bishops and the clergy were constantly cursing them, but that was nothing to them, because they were all [already] accursed and forsworn and lost). The more commonplace liturgical cursing became, the less effective it was likely to be.

Philological evidence suggests that cursing was an ancient practice that long predated Christianity even if we only know of it through documents transmitted by the Church. Half a dozen OE verbs denote the act of cursing: *cursian*, *wirgan* (or *ā-wirgean*), *wearg-cweþan*, *mis-cweðan*, *yfel-cweþan*, and *amānsumian*.⁷⁸ Not one of them is borrowed from Latin. While the last one cited may be of relatively recent origin and is strictly ecclesiastical in usage (the sole meaning of *amānsumian* is 'to excommunicate, anathematize'), the other verbs probably derive from pre-Christian use. Two of them, *cursian* and *wirgan*, were adopted by the Church to refer to the act of liturgical cursing. In a similar manner, other native words were adopted to refer to such basic religious concepts as *god* 'a god, the Christian God', *heofon* 'the sky, the Christian heaven', *helle* 'a dark pit, the Christian hell', *sāwel* 'a person's spirit, the Christian soul', *fullūht* 'confirmation, Christian baptism', and so on. In a manner that was in keeping with Pope Gregory the Great's request to Abbot Mellitus and other Roman missionaries to rededicate pagan temples to Christ rather than destroy them,⁷⁹ the native vocabulary of the Angles and Saxons was thus appropriated to serve clerical ends.

⁷⁷ *The Peterborough Chronicle, 1070–1154*, ed. by Cecily Clark, 2nd edn (Oxford, 1970), p. 56, lines 52–54.

⁷⁸ Jane Roberts and Christian Kay with Lynne Grundy, *A Thesaurus of Old English*, 2 vols (London, 1995), 1, entry no. 16.02.04.14.02.01.

⁷⁹ *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, ed. and trans. by Bertram Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors (Oxford, 1969), 1:30 (pp. 106–09).

The nexus of Old English vocabulary that relates to the key verb *wirgan* (with its alternate spellings *wirigan*, *wirian*, *wergian*, *wyrian*, etc.) is worth special attention. While that verb can mean 'to excommunicate', it more commonly means 'to curse' in a general sense. Similarly, the cognate Gothic verb *ga-wargjan* means 'to condemn', while the Old Saxon cognate *gi-waragean* means 'to punish [a criminal]'.⁸⁰ The common noun for a criminal in OE, *wearg* (or *wearh*), the root of the weak verb *wirgan*, etymologically denotes not just 'malefactor' but 'one who is condemned or cast out'.⁸¹ Similarly, the adjective *wearg* (with its variants *werg*, *werig*, and *wyrig*) means either 'evil' or 'accursed'.⁸² While that adjective is often employed in Christian contexts to denote *sē werga gæst* 'the evil or accursed spirit' — that is, Satan or any devil — it is used in a general sense as well. Since only notorious malefactors are cursed, the verb *wirgan* can also mean 'to do evil' in the sense 'to act like a *wearh*' or malefactor.⁸³ There is no need to conclude on the basis of that sense of the word, however, that cursing was categorically regarded as evil. On the contrary, as we have seen, public ritualistic cursing (as opposed to private cursing for malicious ends) was clearly regarded as a righteous act. It was one weapon in the eternal fight to protect society by purging the land of evil. Thus the related verb *wergan* means 'to defend', while a common noun derived from that verb, *weriend* (or *wergend*), denotes 'a protector'.

As for malicious individuals who were *wearg-cwedol*, or 'given to evil speaking or cursing', they were clearly feared or loathed. The general assumption was that people with evil tongues were more likely to be female than male. The elaborate field blessing known as *Æcerbot*, for example, makes a distinction between male malefactors who are *craftig* 'skilful, powerful' and female malefactors who are *cwidol* — a word that according to Bosworth and Toller can mean either 'ready of speech', 'talkative', or 'eloquent'⁸⁴ depending on one's interpretation of the

⁸⁰ Bosworth and Toller, s.v. *wirgan*, sense I, 'to curse; *maledicere*'.

⁸¹ Bosworth and Toller, s.v. *wearg(-h)*, noun. Also cited by B-T is the Latinized form *wargus*, used in the sense *expulsus*. Cf. Cleasby and Vigfusson, s.v. *vargr* 'a wolf; an outlaw'.

⁸² Bosworth and Toller, s.v. *wearg*, adj.

⁸³ Bosworth and Toller, s.v. *wirgan* sense II, 'to do evil'.

⁸⁴ Toller, s.v. *cwedol*. With reference to the passage from *Æcerbot*, the *DOE*, s.v. *cwedol*, defines that word as 'jabbering; or perhaps in a good sense "persuasive of speech"'. Surely, however, *cwedol* carries a strongly negative sense in this passage, where artful speech is associated with witchcraft intended to undo the good work of the rite.

context in which it is used, but which here means ‘evil-tongued’, if I am not mistaken:

Nu ic bidde þone waldend, se ðe ðas woruld gesceop,
 þæt ne sy nan to þæs cwíðol wif ne to þæs cræftig man,
 þæt awendan ne mæge word þus gecwedene.⁸⁵

(Now I ask the ruler who created this world that no woman be so evil-tongued nor no man so powerful that she or he will be able to turn aside words spoken thus.)

In this cure for barren fields, the power of prayer is used to ward off any evil spells that might have been ‘sown throughout the land’, rather like bad seed that will choke off the good. In the context of speech acts like this, of course, the distinction between a prayer, a wish, and a curse is a fine one that may be hard to draw. In Old English metrical charm 9, the power of cursing is employed with some gravity to deter the theft of cattle. The cattle rustler is to waste away like a piece of dry wood — ‘amen!’⁸⁶ In a much milder example of the power of the curse, the implied speaker of Old English metrical charm 12 calls upon a wen (that is, a swelling or tumour of the flesh) to shrink and disappear. The healer admonishes the wen directly, addressing it with the delightful pet name *wen-chichenne* ‘little chickie wen’. The malignant growth that is sweet-talked in this manner is to build its house in the next village to the north, where a ‘brother’ will comfort it by laying a leaf to its head. Here in the patient’s flesh, however, the wen is to waste away like muck drying up on a wall or like water evaporating in a pail.⁸⁷

Anyone who used the power of cursing for vindictive ends was naturally subject to ecclesiastical censure. As Ælfric remarks in the second of his sermons for St Stephen’s Day, ‘Nis namum men alyfed þæt he oðerne wyrige [. . .]. Ure tunge is gesceapen to Godes herungum ond to gesceadwisum spræcum, na to deofollicum wyriungum’⁸⁸ (No person is permitted to curse another. Our tongue has been fashioned for the praise of God and for judicious speech, not for

⁸⁵ Dobbie, p. 118.

⁸⁶ Dobbie, pp. 125–26.

⁸⁷ Dobbie, p. 128.

⁸⁸ *Ælfric’s Catholic Homilies: The Second Series: Text*, ed. by Malcolm Godden, EETS SS, 5 (Oxford, 1979), sermon 2, lines 190 and 205–07 (p. 17), my punctuation. Allen J. Frantzen, *The Literature of Penance in Anglo-Saxon England* (New Brunswick, NJ, 1983), p. 48, calls attention to an early Irish penitential (the Penitential of Cummean) that makes a distinction between an outright curse, which is understood to do actual harm and hence requires rigorous penance, and mere angry speech, for which lighter penance is required.

devilish cursing). In similar fashion, an anonymous Old English sermon given the modern title 'Evil Tongues' warns its intended audience, who seem to be members of the clergy, against indulging in backbiting, slander, bad-mouthing, and envious speech of any kind, for 'sio tunge þonne sendað þa sawle in hellegrund'⁸⁹ (the tongue then will send the soul into the abyss of hell).

Like speech in general, then, the act of cursing was regarded as a power to be viewed as either righteous or evil depending on the motives and circumstances of its use. God himself cursed the serpent in the Garden of Eden — 'ðu bist awyrgeð betweox eallum nytenum' (cursed are you above all cattle, Gen. 3. 14) — and cursed Cain after the killing of Abel: 'Nu þu bist awirgeð ofer eorþan' (And now you are cursed from the ground, Gen. 4. 11).⁹⁰ But the devil or any blasphemer could also curse God, just as angry parents might curse their children or ungrateful children might curse their parents and are condemned by Ælfric in that same St Stephen's Day sermon for doing so.⁹¹ The moral ambiguity that lies at the core of the practice of malediction finds perhaps no clearer expression than in Bede's account of the response of Christian Irishmen to the unprovoked invasion of their land by King Ecgfrith of Northumbria in the year 684. The Irish cursed him, 'and although those who curse cannot inherit the kingdom of God, yet one may believe that those who were justly cursed for their wickedness quickly suffered the penalty of their guilt at the avenging hand of God'.⁹² Here Bede manages both to find fault with cursing and to sympathize with innocent persons who are driven to curse. At the same time, he reveals his confidence in the efficacy of cursing that proceeds from righteous motives, for he conspicuously points out that Ecgfrith died the following year.

⁸⁹ David McDougall and Ian McDougall, "'Evil Tongues': A Previously Unedited Old English Sermon", *ASE*, 26 (1997), 209–29 (p. 217, par. 5). The biblical authority for this assertion is Ecclesiasticus 21. 30, 'Dum maledicit impius diabolum maledicit ipse animam suam', *Biblia sacra*, p. 1055 (where this book is titled 'Liber Iesu filii Sirach'); cf. *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, p. 22: 'When an ungodly man curses his adversary, he curses his own soul' (Sirach 21. 27).

⁹⁰ *Old English Version of the Heptateuch*, ed. by Crawford, pp. 89 and 92 (the latter at col. 2). The Old English translation more closely matches the Vulgate Latin reading 'maledictus eris super terram' (you will be cursed over the earth).

⁹¹ *Ælfric's Catholic Homilies*, ed. by Godden, sermon 2, lines 196–202 (p. 17).

⁹² *Bede's Ecclesiastical History* IV:26, ed. by Colgrave and Mynors, pp. 426–29: 'Et quamuis maledici regnum Dei possidere non possint, creditum est tamen quod hi qui merito inpietatis suae maledicebantur, ocuis Domino uindice poenas sui reatus luerent.'

Since women were thought to be more likely than men to use spells and curses for illicit ends, they were naturally mistrusted more, for their evil acts were more likely to be covert. King Alfred makes a clear distinction based on gender in the part of his law code that, drawing on Mosaic precedent, specifies the death penalty for witches: ‘*ƿa fæmnan ðe gewuniað anfon galdorcræft ond scinlæcan ond wiccan, ne læt ðu ða libban*’⁹³ (Those women who are in the habit of practicing enchantments,⁹⁴ and magicians and witches, do not let them live). Here Alfred expands upon his biblical source, ‘*maleficos non patieris vivere*’ (do not allow malefactors to live, Exod. 22. 18) by identifying three sets of criminals deserving of capital punishment.⁹⁵ His apparent assumption that women are the more likely sex to resort to enchantments hints of a more widespread anxiety concerning the tendency of women to use words as weapons. A similar anxiety is evident in those Old English charms, sermons, charters, and penitentials that allude to women who have sexual relations with the devil, or who brew illicit love potions, or who seek the devil’s aid in making prophecies, or who bring their children to crossroads to engage in forbidden rites, or who drive stakes into wooden simulacra with the intent to do harm, among other such practices. The line between women who were *cwēdol* in the sense of talkative and *cwēdol* in the sense of practising black magic was evidently one that could readily be crossed, in the eyes of a witch-hunter. Although Anglo-Saxon England seems to have been relatively free of witchcraft hysteria of the kind that blighted Europe during the aftermath of the Reformation, the presence of witches was taken for granted and their power to do harm was feared.⁹⁶

⁹³ Preface to the laws, sec. 30; *Die Gesetze der Angelsachsen*, ed. by Liebermann, I, 38 (MS G).

⁹⁴ In a variant text of this part of Alfred’s law code this wording differs significantly, as Jane Roberts points out in her article (published under the name Jane Crawford) ‘Evidences for Witchcraft in Anglo-Saxon England’, *MÆ*, 32 (1963), 99–116 (at p. 110). In place of *gealdorcræft* ‘magic spells’, MS E (CCCC, MS 173, fols 1–32) reads *gealdorcræftigan* ‘those who are expert in enchantments, magicians’. The phrase [*onfon*] *gealdorcræftigan* ‘to receive persons skilled in magic’ thus takes on a sexual connotation that could make a woman’s illicit activities seem yet more sinister.

⁹⁵ As is pointed out by Roberts, ‘Evidences for Witchcraft’, p. 108.

⁹⁶ See further Audrey L. Meaney, ‘Women, Witchcraft and Magic in Anglo-Saxon England’, in *Superstition and Popular Medicine in Anglo-Saxon England*, ed. by D. G. Scragg (Manchester, 1989), pp. 9–40. Meaney concludes that Anglo-Saxon witches are unlikely to have been ‘professionals’; rather, they were ordinary women who for one or another reason were driven to seek control by illicit means (p. 29). In the same volume note also Anthony Davies, ‘Witches in Anglo-Saxon England: Five Case Studies’, pp. 41–56. In his recent article ‘From

Archaeological evidence has recently come to light that suggests that the justice that was meted out to convicted witches was both quick and emphatic. Excavations at the famous seventh-century burial site at Sutton Hoo, East Anglia, have revealed an area just outside the royal burial ground that was used for some centuries as a dumping ground for persons whose bodies have been discovered lying face down, or decapitated, or sprawled in a contorted posture. The discovery of traces of rope around the neck of one of these victims suggests that they were the victims of capital punishment at a nearby site that has not been identified (OE *cwealm-stōw* 'killing place'). There a gallows (OE *wearg-trēow*) is likely to have stood, perhaps in the shadow of the great pagan burial mounds, far from hallowed ground. The director of these excavations, Martin Carver, speculates that the killings in question, which might have occurred at various times beginning in the pagan seventh century and continuing intermittently during the period of Anglo-Saxon Christian kingship, were probably regarded as 'a necessary instrument for the removal of ideological or political deviants'.⁹⁷ This suggestion may well be correct. It is also possible, however, that some victims were social deviants such as witches. A notorious account of a suspected witch being drowned at London Bridge in the later years of the tenth century lends support to that surmise, although her death may have been the result of mob action or an ordeal that went wrong rather than an authorized process. In this incident the woman and her son are said to have forfeited their estate 'because they drove an iron pin into [an image of] Ælfsige', the father of a neighbour, 'and it was discovered, and the deadly image was dragged out of her room'.⁹⁸ The woman and her son were conveyed to London, where the woman was drowned although her son escaped — a sign that vigorous resistance to charges of witchcraft is also part of the social history of this period. This is one instance when a suspected witch paid with her life. To raise yet a third possibility regarding the Sutton Hoo

Sorcery to Witchcraft: Clerical Conceptions of Magic in the Later Middle Ages', *Speculum*, 76 (2001), 960–90, Michael D. Bailey makes a persuasive case that the later Middle Ages were marked by a general transformation of sorcery, practised chiefly by men, into witchcraft, practised chiefly by women. He does not take into account evidence bearing on magic and witchcraft that derives from Anglo-Saxon England, however. The figure of the witch was already well established well before the Conquest, even though knowledge of what, other than her sex, distinguished the female witch (OE *wicce*) from her male counterpart (OE *wicca* 'male witch' or 'witch without gender distinction') remains largely speculative.

⁹⁷ Martin Carver, *Sutton Hoo: Burial Ground of Kings?* (London, 1998), pp. 137–44 (p. 140).

⁹⁸ *Anglo-Saxon Charters*, ed. by Robertson, no. 37 (pp. 68–69), = Sawyer no. 1377; Robertson's translation, with my bracketed addition.

victims, people who had been excommunicated may have been buried uncereemoniously in such a place, for at least in theory, they were not to be interred in consecrated ground.⁹⁹ Guesswork can run rampant in instances like this, for archaeological evidence can take us only so far. What is beyond dispute is that the Anglo-Saxons dealt with malefactors through a system of rigorous justice backed by corporal punishment including execution. The killing fields at Sutton Hoo lend poignancy to that section of the law code of King Alfred that calls for capital punishment for witches.

The preceding part of my argument can be summarized as follows. Whether we look to the solemn ecclesiastical rite of excommunication or to the wills or donations of individual persons, the practice of cursing is well attested in Anglo-Saxon England. The mental world of the people of that era must have been permeated by the notion that people were capable of doing harm to others through the power of their words. In the annual cycle of the liturgy, cursing played a dramatic role in rites of purification whereby the Church purged society from pollution. Among private individuals, cursing was a recourse by which people might try to strike at their enemies, using the power of speech when they lacked other means. Those unfortunate individuals who regarded themselves as the victims of injustice but who had no hope of legal redress, like the fictive woman represented in *The Wife's Lament*, faced essentially two choices. They could either suffer in silence, looking forward perhaps to a better world in the hereafter, or they could resort to whatever morally dubious sources of power they thought were available to them, despite the grave risks that could ensue from that choice.

One question is worth asking for its possible relevance to *The Wife's Lament*. Did the Anglo-Saxons regard cursing as an irrevocable act, or did they believe that a curse could be reversed or might simply lose its effect over time?

Although one hesitates to generalize about the Anglo-Saxon mind, the strong likelihood is that a curse was not generally regarded as indelible. However emphatic the act of excommunication may have been to those who took part in it, that act was still potentially revocable. Any heretic or sinner could, after all, be welcomed back into the fold. Only God had the power to damn a soul eternally. If in the course of time a sentence of excommunication merited annulment, then

⁹⁹ On this point note Rosalind Hill, 'The Theory and Practice of Excommunication in Medieval England', *History*, 2nd series, 42 (1957), 1-10 (at p. 1), and Treharne, 'Unique Old English Formula', pp. 197-98.

formulas of reintegration into the community were available.¹⁰⁰ As for the curses in Anglo-Saxon legal documents, many of them conclude with an 'escape clause' that allows their dire consequences to be nullified. An example of such a clause occurs at the end of a royal charter, dated to the year 864, that records with rhetorical flair, as well as with a use of the subjunctive mood that converts what might have been a curse to nothing more strenuous than a reminder, the granting of special privileges by King Æthelbert of Wessex to the foundation at Sherborne:

Gyf þanne hwilc man to þan geþristlæce oððe mid deofles searwum to þam beswicen sye þæt he þis on ænigum þingum lytlum oððe myclum þence to gebrecanne oððe to onwendanne, wite he þonne þæt he þæs riht agieldende sie byforan Cristes ðrymnsetle þonne ealle hefonware ond eorþware on his andweardnesse beoð onstyrede ond onhrerede *nymþe he hit ær her on worlde mid rhyte gebete.*¹⁰¹

(If, however, any person is so presumptuous or so beguiled by the wiles of the devil that he has in mind breaking or changing this [donation] in any way, whether small or great, let him know that he shall have to pay amends for it before the glorious throne of Christ when all the denizens of heaven and earth will be stirred up and aroused in his presence *unless he has rightfully made amends for it here in this world.*)

Since no decision can be made in advance concerning what constitutes 'rightful amends', such a clause opens a wide door to future negotiations as to how the terms of a grant are to be implemented. As for private curses, it seems unlikely that any formal mechanism was required to undo them.¹⁰² Obviously an informal curse (such as verbal invective) that is uttered in the heat of the moment can be regarded as having no force once the incident that has given rise to it has passed.

¹⁰⁰ As Little points out in *Benedictine Maledictions*, pp. 143–46 ('Rites of Reintegration'), it often happened that conflicting parties arrived at some form of settlement. The desired end of reintegrating excommunicated persons back into the community could be achieved by a variety of means, from a series of benedictions — 'May you be blessed in town and blessed in the field', and so on — to more complex rites that reversed the earlier rite of excommunication.

¹⁰¹ *Anglo-Saxon Charters*, ed. by Robertson, no. 11 (p. 18), = Sawyer no. 333, my punctuation and emphasis.

¹⁰² As is noted in one popular reference work, 'In most cases a curse is not meant to be either fatal or permanent. It punishes an enemy until he makes amends, when the curse is formally removed': *Man, Myth and Magic: The Illustrated Encyclopedia of Mythology, Religion, and the Unknown*, ed. by Richard Cavendish (New York, 1995), s.v. 'curse'.

The bearing of this point on one's understanding of *The Wife's Lament* is worth making explicit. In any society where cursing is regarded as a potential response to severe provocations and where a curse can be revoked, annulled, or simply forgotten, then one does not have to imagine the speaker of a curse as a demented soul lacking in all decency. On the contrary, one can regard him or her as a person who, at the moment in question, is deeply offended and who aims for redress. The Wife, as we have seen, is suffering the effects of a *fēhðu* 'act of hostility' that has been forced upon her, causing her to suffer a grievous loss of honour and comfort. Her husband seems to have abandoned her, and she has been forced to dwell in a cave or den in the midst of some gloomy woods. Rather than enjoying a privileged position as a person of high rank in society, she must now live as a *wearg*, an outcast criminal. Her curse on her husband, and by extension on all false lovers, is a plausible response to this dire reversal of fortune. While some modern readers may regard that response as either ignoble or unfeminine, and while devout Christians may regard it as morally reprehensible, it is in accord with the code of honour and vengeance that was in vogue during the pagan period and that never ceased to appeal to the Anglo-Saxons.¹⁰³ In time, we can imagine, the woman and her husband could yet be reconciled. If the woman were ever restored to her former place of honour, then her malediction would not necessarily remain in force. It could be cancelled out by blessings. It also could simply be forgotten: that is, its terms, although technically never annulled, could lose their effect in the absence of any animating volition.

Of course, the author of *The Wife's Lament* gives no hint that any such reconciliation will take place. The whole point of this poem is to represent a woman in an agony of despair. All the same, as William Ian Miller has shown with regard to medieval Iceland and John Hill with regard to Anglo-Saxon England, feuds in the early Middle Ages were always subject to negotiation.¹⁰⁴ Some feuds were resolved through peaceful settlement. Enmities could dissolve, and even an egregious killing could be laid to rest if generous recompense was made. Rancour between enemies might remain a continuing source of tension among surviving kindreds, but there was nothing inevitable about renewed acts of violence. Since

¹⁰³ Dorothy Whitelock, *The Audience of Beowulf* (Oxford, 1951), stresses that 'killing for the sake of vengeance was not felt to be incompatible with Christian ethics at any period in Anglo-Saxon times' (p. 13).

¹⁰⁴ William Ian Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking: Feud, Law, and Society in Saga Iceland* (Chicago, 1990); John M. Hill, *The Cultural World in Beowulf* (Toronto, 1995), esp. ch. 1: 'Feud Settlements in *Beowulf*' (pp. 25–37).

the feud served a double function as both an expression of violence and a means by which violence was contained, there is no reason to believe that an audience of Anglo-Saxons would have viewed the speaker of *The Wife's Lament* as suffering from an injury that could never find redress. Despite her harsh words, the woman still speaks of her husband 'in terms of endearment (*min freond, wine, se min wine*)', as Greenfield pointed out even while arguing for the 'curse' reading.¹⁰⁵ Still, no reader of the Exeter Book will mistake the literary point of this monologue. That point is to represent, in verse of a highly evocative nature, someone who has lost her husband, her home, and her high standing in society and who is now suffering the grief and wrath that one would expect a proud woman to feel in those circumstances — especially a woman of the Germanic Heroic Age, if the poem is indeed to be imagined as set in that era.

Towards a Historical Anthropology of Cursing

As we have seen, the textual records deriving from Anglo-Saxon England that relate to cursing are legion. Unfortunately, those texts reveal little about the mentality that finds expression in that act. In particular, they cast little light on private or furtive cursing as opposed to such public events as the ceremony of excommunication or the declaration of a will. It is therefore worth seeing if the reading context for *The Wife's Lament* developed in the last section, which focuses exclusively on the early medieval period, can be 'thickened' through a very selective review of cursing as a general practice.

There is no need to review in detail the post-Conquest history of cursing in England, for that history has been surveyed by the distinguished Oxford historian Keith Thomas in chapter 16 of his book *Religion and the Decline of Magic*. There Thomas reviews the long history of 'the belief that it was possible for one person to do physical injury to another by the mere enunciation of hostile words'.¹⁰⁶ Thomas gives many instances of the ecclesiastical power of malediction as well as the use of curses by laymen in instances of theft and similar offences. He notes that in England, the medieval practice of cursing notorious offenders through quarterly anathema was given up for doctrinal reasons only as late as 1534 under Archbishop Thomas Cranmer. In the intellectual climate of the

¹⁰⁵ Greenfield, 'Wife's Lament Reconsidered', in *Hero and Exile*, p. 154.

¹⁰⁶ Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic: Studies in Popular Beliefs in Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century England* (London, 1971), pp. 502–12 (p. 502).

Reformation, cursing was regarded as blasphemy, for it represented 'a magical manipulation of the Almighty's powers which no human being should attempt'.¹⁰⁷ As organized cursing fell into disfavour, however, spontaneous individual cursing seems to have thrived. By being driven underground, cursing became the special prerogative of those who felt themselves to be the victims of injustice. 'In popular sentiment,' observes Thomas, 'the more justified the curser's anger, the more likely that his imprecation would take effect.'¹⁰⁸ Those who cursed were often women. One example is Jane Smyth, who cursed Mrs Rod of Hereford in 1673, 'wishing that before she died she might crawl upon the ground like a toad upon all fours'.¹⁰⁹ Such curses could easily lead to charges of witchcraft.

While the more modern history and folklore of cursing in the British Isles has been documented only spottily, clearly cursing did not cease with the Reformation. George Lyman Kittredge calls attention to 'cursing stones' and 'cursing wells' in various parts of the British Isles, noting that wishing wells have at times been used for the purposes of malediction.¹¹⁰ He also cites evidence from England of the burying of metal tablets engraved with curses, a practice that has ample precedent in the ancient Mediterranean world. Hundreds of such tablets, which the Romans called *defixiones*, have been discovered in the wells at Bath, England, and over sixteen hundred in the ancient world as a whole.¹¹¹ It is possible that the Roman practice of inscribing tablets with curses came to be perpetuated in later centuries in altered form. Intriguing in this connection is a nineteenth-century cursing text, addressed against a particular named individual, that was written on a piece of paper found to be lodged in a crevice of the brickwork of a house in East Street, Hereford, where it had been sequestered together with a crude fabric doll impaled with pins. Ralph Merrifield cites the whole text

¹⁰⁷ Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, p. 503.

¹⁰⁸ Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, p. 505.

¹⁰⁹ Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, p. 508.

¹¹⁰ George Lyman Kittredge, *Witchcraft in Old and New England* (Cambridge, MA, 1929), pp. 132–33 and the notes to those pages.

¹¹¹ See Ralph Merrifield, *The Archaeology of Ritual and Magic* (London, 1987), pp. 137–42, and Daniel Ogden, 'Binding Spells: Curse Tablets and Voodoo Dolls in the Greek and Roman Worlds', in *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe*, vol. 1: *Ancient Greece and Rome*, ed. by Bengt Ankarloo and Stuart Clark (London, 1999), pp. 1–90.

of this curse and interprets it as 'a spontaneous outburst of envy and malice' that shows 'no esoteric knowledge', only a will to do harm.¹¹²

Given the omnipresence of the practice of cursing in pre-industrial societies, it would be easy to overburden my argument with examples drawn from the literature of anthropology. One classic example from the writings of E. E. Evans-Pritchard ought to suffice. On the basis of extensive fieldwork among the Azande, a tribe inhabiting parts of the Congo River basin just south of the Sudan, Evans-Pritchard wrote as follows concerning the concept and practice of witchcraft among the members of that tribe:

A witch performs no rite, utters no spell, and possesses no medicines. An act of witchcraft is a psychic act [. . .]. I had no difficulty in discovering what Azande think about witchcraft, nor in observing what they do to combat it. These ideas and actions are on the surface of their life and are accessible to anyone who lives for a few weeks in their homesteads [. . .]. Death is due to witchcraft and must be avenged [. . .]. Men and women are equally witches. Men may be bewitched by other men or by women, but women are generally bewitched only by members of their own sex [. . .]. Witchcraft is ubiquitous. It plays its part in every activity of Zande life [. . .]. When a Zande speaks of witchcraft he does not speak of it as we speak of the weird witchcraft of our own history. Witchcraft is to him a commonplace happening and he seldom passes a day without mentioning it [. . .]. Witchcraft is a classification of misfortunes which while differing from each other in other respects have this single common character, their harmfulness to man.¹¹³

Clearly witchcraft among the Azande is (or until recently was) part of what might be called the practice of everyday life. Witches are believed to have the power to do harm by merely wishing it, and any ill chance or event or condition is likely to be ascribed to their activity. Although Evans-Pritchard does not discuss the specific rhetoric of cursing, he speaks of the prevalence of 'hatred, jealousy, envy, backbiting, slander, and so forth' and identifies any of these sentiments or practices as a possible source of harm, for 'Azande think of hatred and envy and greed in terms of witchcraft and likewise think of witchcraft in terms of the sentiments it discloses'.¹¹⁴ While the connection of these observations to *The Wife's Lament* must not be allowed to carry much weight, it is worth noting that were the gist of the Wife's monologue to be uttered by an abandoned Zande woman, she would immediately be suspected of an attempt at witchcraft, for the

¹¹² Merrifield, *Archaeology*, pp. 155–56.

¹¹³ E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande* (Oxford, 1937), pp. 21, 26, 31, and 63–64.

¹¹⁴ Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic*, p. 107.

Azande regard ill thoughts, malicious words, and violent acts as parts of a single spectrum of aggression. If the estranged husband of such a woman were to fall ill or suffer an accident, then anyone who had heard the woman's words would assume a cause-and-effect relationship.

To return to ground closer to Anglo-Saxon England, the British social historian Wendy Davies has pointed out how common the activity of cursing was in medieval Wales, Ireland, and Brittany. She stresses that among the Celtic peoples, a curse was not necessarily an expression of personal anger.¹¹⁵ It was much more likely to stem from a person's sense of wounded honour. Cursing was regarded as an appropriate response when status was denied or insulted. As in Anglo-Saxon England, cursing in the Celtic areas of medieval Europe was surely a reflex of ancient practices, for the ancient Celts were notorious for their extreme sensitivity to insult and their willingness to see their enemies 'satirized to death'. Druids were feared for their power to curse as well as bless. When the Irish were converted to Christianity, many of the saints of the new religion (including St Patrick and St Brigit of Kildare) were renowned for their deployment of those same twin powers.¹¹⁶

Perhaps the most memorable instance of an efficacious curse in the Old Irish literary context is the incident of St Ronan's curse in the *Buile Suibhne*. When the protagonist of that tale, the pagan warrior-king Suibhne, hears that St Ronan is establishing a church in his territory without his permission, he charges into the church stark naked, manhandles the saint while he is singing the psalms, and casts his illuminated psalter into a nearby lake. A day and a night pass, and then a helpful otter returns the book unharmed. Thankful for the miracle, yet still 'smarting from such contempt and abuse',¹¹⁷ St Ronan prays a curse upon Suibhne. Not long after, when Ronan approaches a battlefield in an attempt to

¹¹⁵ Wendy Davies, 'Anger and the Celtic Saint', in *Anger's Past: The Social Uses of an Emotion in the Middle Ages*, ed. by Barbara H. Rosenwein (Ithaca NY, 1998), pp. 191–202. Lester K. Little makes the same point with relation to liturgical curses in 'Anger in Monastic Curses', in the same volume, pp. 9–35.

¹¹⁶ Lester K. Little, 'Cursing', in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. by Mircea Eliade, vol. IV (New York, 1987), pp. 182–85 (at pp. 182–83). Tomás Ó Cathasaigh, 'Curse and Satire', *Éigse*, 21 (1986), 10–15, remarks upon the similarity of ecclesiastical curse and pagan satire. Many examples of saints taking over druidical functions, including cursing, are cited by Charles Plummer, *Vitae Sanctorum Hiberniae*, 2 vols (Oxford, 1919), I, pp. clxvii–clxxxviii.

¹¹⁷ Seamus Heaney, *Sweeney Astray: A Version from the Irish* (New York, 1983), p. 4. The Old Irish text of the *Buile Suibhne*, edited in a bilingual version by J. G. O'Keeffe in 1913, has been republished with a new introduction by Joseph Falaky Nagy (Dublin, 1996).

make peace between Suibhne's army and a hostile host, the King, still resentful of such intrusions, strikes one of Ronan's psalmists dead with a cast of his spear. With the cast of another spear he knocks the saint's bell from his neck and very nearly strikes the saint himself. After this renewed insult Ronan reiterates his curse in the strongest terms. God enacts it, and the King, convulsed, is changed into bird form and is forced to flee, mad, away from human company. In this paradigmatic story hinging on the clash of the old pagan order with the new Christian one, heroic rage of the ancient type (what Homer would have called *μῆνις* 'wrath') is nullified by calm words of prayer. Far from representing a spontaneous outbreak of powerful feelings, St Ronan's initial curse follows upon a full day and night of reflection followed by a sign from God. What provokes the saint's wrath is not exactly an injury to his rank, as in the examples discussed by Davies; rather, it is an insult against the Word of God, the whole class of clergy, and the honour of the Church. An ancient power associated with the druids is here put to Christian use.

The ancient Romans too, like the Celts and the Norsemen and many other peoples of the ancient and early medieval world, took cursing for granted as a possible recourse to injury. Reference has already been made to the Roman practice of inscribing lead tablets with curses. An aspect of Roman cursing that is more closely relevant to *The Wife's Lament* (and that is not so remote from what we find in *Skírnismál*) is the tradition in elegiac poetry whereby a person curses his real or imagined enemies. Ovid's 644-line poem *Ibis* is doubtless the supreme example of this topos.¹¹⁸ This remarkable poem expresses the author's bitterness at being exiled, at the height of his powers and fame, to what he regards as a backwater Roman colony on the shores of the Black Sea. In couplet after couplet, Ovid directs his venom against the unnamed person (who may be no more than a literary fiction) whom he blames for his banishment. A few lines

¹¹⁸ Many examples could be cited of the theme of cursing in Roman elegiac poetry. Propertius, for instance, draws down a withering curse on his favourite *lena* 'bawd, procuress' at the beginning of poem 5 of book 4 of his *Elegies*, as K. Sara Myers has discussed in 'The Poet and the Procuress: The *Lena* in Latin Love Elegy', *Journal of Roman Studies*, 86 (1996), 1–21 (esp. pp. 6–12). Myers shows how the lover's vituperation of the *lena* 'articulates the rules of the erotic games which are the staple of Roman elegy' (p. 1). Central to those games is an attempt by the scorned speaker to turn the situation to his advantage through the clever use of words. On the literary evidence for cursing in the ancient world, note more generally Lindsay Watson, *Arae: The Curse Poetry of Antiquity* (Leeds, 1991). I am grateful to Carole Newlands for these references.

taken from the earlier part of the poem (lines 113–16) are enough to communicate its spirit:

Exul, inops erres, alienaque limina lustres,
Exiguumque petas ore tremente cibum.
Nec corpus querulo nec mens vacet aegra dolore,
Noxque die gravior sit tibi, nocte dies.¹¹⁹

(May you wander as an exile, destitute! May you haunt the doors of others and beg a little food with trembling lips! May neither your body nor your sick mind be free from shooting pain! May night be worse than day for you, and day worse than night!)

However emphatic the curses that are expressed here may seem, they approach the innocuous when compared to ones that are voiced elsewhere in the poem. Indeed, this literary tour de force includes so much mock-ferocious grandstanding that one must think that even if the exiled Ovid knew few other comforts, he must have wrung the last drop of pleasure from this piece. In addition to wishing upon his enemy such disasters as exile, famine, drought, destitution, and all manner of bodily pain, Ovid expresses a sharp desire to see the offender's reputation stained by such abominations as cannibalism (as in the myth of Pelops and Tantalus) and incest (as in the myth of Myrra and her father) before his life is cut off by any of a long list of possible violent or shameful deaths, each one of which the poet savours. And all these sufferings, we are told, are to be only the prelude to the man's dismemberment in this world and the next, when he will be haunted by the author's angry shade. Ovid's exuberant 'curse to end all curses' concludes with a wish that his enemy experience a fate that, in the eyes of this ultra-sophisticated author, exceeds all other torments: 'Denique Sarmaticas inter Getiscasque sagittas / His precor ut vivas et moriari locis' (And finally, I pray that it is in these very regions,¹²⁰ among Sarmatian and Getic [Gothic] arrows, that you will live and die!, lines 637–38). One can only imagine with what amusement Anglo-Saxon readers might have read this couplet, with its reference to barbarian Getae who were not far removed from their own ancestors.

Anglo-Saxons were not reading Ovid's *Ibis*, however, and that poem was obviously no model for the author of *The Wife's Lament*. My purpose in citing it is to substantiate the assertion that cursing and other forms of vituperation

¹¹⁹ Ovid: *The Art of Love and Other Poems*, ed. and trans. by J. H. Mozley, rev. edn (London, 1939), pp. 251–307 (p. 260). Gareth D. Williams, *The Curse of Exile: A Study of Ovid's Ibis* (Cambridge, 1996), calls attention to the artfulness of this poem.

¹²⁰ That is, at Tomis, the place near the mouth of the Danube to which Ovid had been exiled.

have been, are now, and probably always will be one of the resources of the angry and outcast. In addition, a glance at Ovid's poem ought to convince anyone that cursing is a legitimate *literary* activity. It is not a privileged discourse that has to pass a test of sincerity; it can be put on literary display alongside anything else that pertains to the human condition.

The preceding review of cursing as a general practice leads to three main conclusions. First of all, there exists a sharp asymmetry in regard to the *power to do harm through physical acts* versus the *power to do harm through words*. People who are in outright physical control of a situation have no need to resort to cursing. Only those who lack physical control, especially when they have no hope of ever gaining it, are likely to curse their enemies despite the risks that may be involved in that undertaking.¹²¹

Related to this asymmetry between the weapons available to the mighty and to the weak is a less emphatic distinction based on gender. With the exception of male clerics who have renounced the use of weapons, men generally do not curse. According to the available evidence for the western European tradition, *those who most commonly utter curses are women*. Of course, this distinction is relative rather than absolute. Women who occupy positions of real power in society are unlikely to resort to cursing, for they can enforce their will by direct command. Similarly, men who are deprived of power as a consequence of being imprisoned, maimed, or cast out are more likely to be driven to curse.

A third conclusion to be drawn is that *individual persons who resort to cursing are most likely to do so out of a sense of shame and loss of place or status*. Persons who are in possession of what they regard as their due have no need to curse. It is thus not powerlessness per se that predisposes people to curse; rather, it is a sense of wounded honour.

The Wife's Lament *Reconsidered*

Given her grief-stricken personal history as set forth in the first four-fifths of her monologue, one might be tempted to regard the speaker of *The Wife's Lament*

¹²¹ As Little remarks in his encyclopedia article 'Cursing', 'The value of curses should in the final analysis be seen in relation to power, for they are all, in some way, instruments of the weak. Those who have physical, military, or juridical power tend to use such power; they use it to maintain their vision of order. The aged, the sick, the pregnant, the infirm, the outcast all lack such power, and yet they have ipso facto some special power of the word' (p. 184).

from a Kristevan perspective as a participant in a long tradition whereby women, as the subordinated sex, have the capacity to use grief and an almost hallucinatory rage to revolt against their abjection. According to Kristeva, this revolt can find expression in language that almost has the force of prophecy and ‘enters into competition with biblical abominations’ — an apparent reference to the text of Deuteronomy, with its panoply of curses.¹²² In Kristeva’s view, what offers ‘abjected’ women the prospect of escape from their condition is not cursing, however, but rather the power of art. It is art, from her perspective, that offers distressed women a mode of purification and the possibility of salvation through a mechanism of escape that, although doubtless attractive to those in need of it, Kristeva never fully explains. To some extent, light can be cast on *The Wife’s Lament* through analysis along these lines. It might be argued that a degree of catharsis through art is achieved through the poem itself, which well exemplifies the art of the *gied* — that is, the art of Anglo-Saxon poetry in its primitivist guise, harking back to a time, whether real or imagined, when all poetry was public and oral in its mode of production and was allied with heightened speech, magic, ritual, lamentation, and prophecy.¹²³ This particular *gied* is presented as if it were performed by a female narrator who, according to the poem’s central fiction, speaks out her sorrow in rhetorically heightened verse: ‘Ic þis giedd wrece’ (I sing out this song, perform this lay, ra). This redemption through the medium of art, if it can be regarded as such, remains only a very partial one for the speaker of the Old English poem, however, for no indication is given that the woman is relieved from her pain through the act of speaking her monologue.¹²⁴

¹²² Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. by Leon S. Roudiez (New York, 1982), p. 186, originally published as *Pouvoirs de l’horreur* (Paris, 1980). Patricia A. Belanoff, ‘Women’s Songs, Women’s Language: *Wulf and Eadwacer* and *The Wife’s Lament*’, in *New Readings on Women*, ed. by Damico and Olsen, pp. 193–203, offers a Kristevan analysis of *The Wife’s Lament* that differs in many ways from mine.

¹²³ In ch. 1 of my book *Homo Narrans: The Poetics and Anthropology of Oral Literature* (Philadelphia, PA, 1999), at pp. 16–19 and 30, I discuss the sense of the noun *gied*, the Anglo-Saxons’ primary term for ‘poetry, song, elevated speech’, as well as the related noun *lēoð* ‘poetry, metrical verse’.

¹²⁴ Chance, *Woman as Hero*, nonetheless argues that the speakers of this poem and the similar poem *Wulf and Eadwacer* find a kind of redemption through poetry: ‘These women narrators are depicted as turning to art, becoming *scopas* [poets, singers] who channel their turbulent emotions into peaceful, harmonious, and rational symbols of the social reality they desire. Fantasy is thus transmuted, for good or for ill, into a kind of reality, if only an artistic one, and the forces of isolation, suffering, privation, loss, and even death — nothingness —

Instead, the speaker of *The Wife's Lament* has recourse to the consolation of vengeance. As we have seen, vengeance in this era was not always condemned as an illiberal sentiment, nor was it necessarily regarded as feeding a spiral of self-destructive violence, as has sometimes been asserted.¹²⁵ Instead, the threat of revenge, sometimes reinforced by deeds, served as a means by which individuals and groups tried to cope with threats or acts of violence in situations where there existed no strong central authority to deter crimes and punish aggressors. Of course, the isolated, friendless, weaponless woman of *The Wife's Lament* has only words with which to strike out at the object of her anger. She is not a member of what the speakers of Old English referred to as the *wāpned-cynn* 'the weaponed sex, the male sex'.¹²⁶ In any event, her former husband or lover is well out of reach of swords or spears. Since that person is the same man of 'blithe demeanor' with whom she had formerly exchanged marriage vows, an element of pain and pathos is introduced to the small drama that we are allowed to overhear. The fact that two people were once in love does not make it impossible for one of them to seek to hurt the other, however. On the contrary, situations of this kind make up the very essence of popular romance. The husband has sworn vows of fidelity that he has subsequently broken. In Anglo-Saxon terms, he is thus the definition of a *wār-loga* 'troth-breaker'.¹²⁷ The husband's crime should

are therefore, even if only temporarily, forestalled' (p. 94). If one accepts Chance's Kristevan view, then one must conceive of the women in question not just as the narrators of their respective monologues but also, in some sense, as the authors of their respective poems. Such an approach raises troublesome questions. Are the narrators of such other elegies as *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer* then also scop? Is any actor in a narrative poem to be regarded as an oral poet by virtue of the fact that he or she is attributed direct discourse while the rules of metre are observed?

¹²⁵ See note 104 above and the references there to the work of Miller and Hill. In 'Maldon and Mythopoesis', *Mediaevalia*, 17 (1994 for 1991), 89–121, I discuss the ethic of vengeance in Anglo-Saxon society with particular reference to the heroic poem *The Battle of Maldon*.

¹²⁶ Bosworth and Toller, s.v. *wāpen-mann* 'a male, a man', *wāpned-cynn* 'the male kind or sex', *wāpned* 'male; a male, a man' as opposed to *wif* 'a woman', and related entries. Even a male infant was known as a *wāpned-bearn* or *wāpned-cild* 'a male child, a boy'. To judge from the etymology of these related words, an asymmetry between the sexes in regard to their association with the tools of physical violence began in the cradle. Of course, the adjective *wāpned* may have become emptied of its etymological meaning in the minds of speakers, often serving only to denote 'male'.

¹²⁷ As a result of its strongly pejorative connotations, *wār-loga* was eventually to undergo a semantic shift and become the modern English word 'warlock', as in the phrase 'witches and warlocks'.

not be underestimated. It is the woman's acute sense of loss and betrayal that incites her to act in accord with an ethos that has never died out and that finds succinct expression in the current proverbial phrase 'Don't get mad; get even'. At the end of the poem, after having recounted the story of her fall from grace, she exerts her will in an act of verbal violence. The intent of this act seems to be to reduce her former lover to just as miserable a state as her own. 'Misery loves company', as a more venerable proverb puts it.¹²⁸ Chaucer's Pandarus, from whose glib tongue a proverb was always ready to slip, was quick to see the application of a similar sentiment when he sought to insinuate himself into the confidence of lovelorn Troilus: 'Men seyn, "to wrecche is consolacioun / To have another felawe in hys peyne"'.¹²⁹ If the speaker of *The Wife's Lament* despairs of being restored to her former state of happiness, then perhaps she can at least have the satisfaction of making sure that her lover loses his. Although modern readers may not regard her sentiment as a noble one, there is no reason to assume that medieval readers would have seen eye to eye with their modern counterparts in that regard.¹³⁰

It is worth stressing that the breakdown in the couple's relationship is not merely the result of a lack of personal affection. The problem is that the husband has failed in his chief duty to his wife, the duty of *mund-byrd* or simply *mund*, 'protection'. Although those specific nouns do not happen to figure in this poem, the concept of *mund* is a culturally central one that has a direct bearing on the speaker's situation.¹³¹ By taking this woman in marriage, the husband

¹²⁸ The proverb is now current chiefly in the United States. Seneca articulated a version of it, 'Solacii genus est turba miserorum' (A crowd of fellow sufferers is a kind of comfort in misery) in his treatise *Ad Marciam de consolatione*, 12.5. The proverb was known in Latin in the mid-fourteenth century in the form 'Gaudium est miseris socios habuisse penarum', which Richard Rolle rendered into English as 'Hit is solace to haue company in peynes': *Richard Rolle: Prose and Verse*, ed. by S. J. Ogilvie-Thomson, EETS, 293 (Oxford, 1988), Meditation B, p. 80, lines 457–58. Of course, the company in which the miserable person finds solace can consist of many different kinds of people. In the passage from Rolle, for example, the companion is Rolle himself comforting the Virgin Mary for her crucified son.

¹²⁹ Geoffrey Chaucer, *Troilus and Criseyde* 1.708–09, quoted from *The Riverside Chaucer*, gen. ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd edn (Boston, MA, 1987), p. 483.

¹³⁰ A similar point is made by Mary Whitlock Blundell in her book *Helping Friends and Harming Enemies: A Study in Sophocles and Greek Ethics* (Cambridge, 1989). Blundell addresses the concept of retaliation as justice. She explores that theme in the plays of Sophocles as a reflex of popular attitudes and as an integral part of each drama.

¹³¹ Bosworth and Toller, s.v. *mund*. The meanings of this cultural keyword that are relevant to the present discussion are I: 'a hand', its etymological sense; III(a): 'protection', a

became her chief *mund-bora* 'protector, patron, guardian, advocate'. He ought to have offered her the protection that a person of his rank would naturally command. Instead, for unknown reasons he has abandoned her, leaving her defenceless against hostile in-laws. According to the laws of the later Anglo-Saxon period, a lord's *mund* ought specifically to include physical shelter,¹³² but the speaker of *The Wife's Lament* has been cast out from her home and forced to live like a beast in a cave. Moreover, the ostracism that the woman of *The Wife's Lament* suffers has all the features of an act of criminal punishment (e.g. *Heht mec mon wunian* 'I was commanded to dwell', 27a). The physical distress that she suffers would have been compounded by shame, seeing that she is a member of the high aristocracy whose status has been insulted. By cursing her husband, what she seems to want to achieve is to see him, too, experience the lot of a *wearg* 'criminal, cursed one, exile'. She imagines him sitting alone under a storm-beaten cliff, 'drenched with water in a dreary dwelling' (49b–50a), cut off from the food and shelter of the mead-hall.¹³³ A man in this state could well be regarded as the secular counterpart of a victim of liturgical cursing, who would be cut off from the physical fellowship of worshippers with their songs, embraces, and communion.

The husband's offence is thus not only reprehensible. It is also what a modern lawyer would call *actionable*. His behaviour has violated the customary laws that create and sustain the institution of marriage. If we were dealing with life rather than literature, one could easily imagine not just the woman but also her whole kin-group seeking either monetary compensation or blood vengeance in retaliation for an injury of this kind. As has long been appreciated, Anglo-Saxon society largely maintained its equilibrium through a system of complex checks on violent or lawless behaviour, and the mainspring of that system was the

metaphorical sense in which it is often used in ordinary discourse; and IV(a): 'protection, guardianship extended by the king to the subject, [. . . or] by the head of a family to its members'. This latter denotation is its technical sense in the laws. Cf. the crime of *mund-bryce* 'breach of *mund*', a violation of the king's peace or of the analogous authority of the head of the household or a similar person. For discussion of the term in its legal sense, see H. Munro Chadwick, *Studies in Anglo-Saxon Institutions* (Cambridge, 1905), pp. 115–26 and 153–56.

¹³² In II Edmund I.I, significantly, *mete* 'food' and *mund* 'protection' are conjoined in an alliterative pair. In the event of blood feud, a killer's kinsmen may be exempted from the feud if they abandon him, provided that 'hy him syððan ne doð mete ne munde' (afterwards they give him neither food nor shelter): *Laws of the Kings of England*, ed. by Robertson, pp. 8–9.

¹³³ Compare 'a wolf, hence 'an outlaw', one who, accursed, may be hunted down like a wolf (Cleasby and Vigfusson, s.v. *vargr*).

principle of collective responsibility. A wrong done to an individual was a wrong done to the kin group, while in like manner, a wrong done by an individual was a wrong for which that person's kin-group was held responsible.¹³⁴ Of course, the woman of *The Wife's Lament* is represented as being so isolated from her kindred that she cannot muster their help, and without that help she has few options. 'Ahte ic leofra lyt on þissum londstede, / holdra freonda', she laments in lines 16–17a (I had few dear ones in this country, few loyal friends [or kindred]). Despite her physical isolation, however, she remains embedded in a nexus of social relationships, and what she has suffered is a social crime and not just a personal injury. In the eyes of a sympathetic party, any action that she takes in response to her suffering, including a recourse to cursing, could be regarded as a defence of the honour of her kin-group as a whole — or at least those were the ethics by which the English lived before the Christian kings of the late Anglo-Saxon period began to try to put an end to the vendetta while extending their royal *mund* over the whole of Britain. But the Wife is represented as a person of some unspecified past time — very possibly pagan times — who evinces no knowledge of Christian teachings. As such, her invective is what a drama critic would call 'in character', for as Little points out, 'cursing was understood to be something pagans did'.¹³⁵ She has been treated as an outcast (*wearg*), and one need not be surprised if her response is to curse (*wirgan*).

Part of the ritual of writing about *The Wife's Lament* seems to be that one first picks one's way through the various critical controversies that beset this poem, exposing other critics' follies for what they are, and then, as a long-awaited gesture of resolution, one offers a new translation that embodies a 'true' reading of the work. The result of this critical enterprise is an interesting chapter in psycho-history and a set of translations that threatens to bury the text. I am now almost in a position to do my part to honour that ritual by offering a literal prose paraphrase of the last twelve lines of *The Wife's Lament*. I should add, however, that I regard my version of those lines as no more than yet one more offering on the smoky altar of this poem. 'True' interpretations would be good if they could be

¹³⁴ As Pollock and Maitland remark, 'Personal injury [in Anglo-Saxon society] is in the first place a cause of feud, of private war between the kindreds of the wrong-doer and of the person wronged' (*History of English Law*, I, 46).

¹³⁵ Little, *Benedictine Maledictions*, p. 90. While the Wife can readily be regarded as a pagan, her identity is left unresolved. While nothing stands in the way of regarding her as a Christian who has no fear of ecclesiastical censure, the poem is devoid of explicitly Christian language.

had; ones that are adequate to a particular passus of a collective journey we can perhaps hope for.

First, as will soon be evident, I take the three verbs *scyle* (42a), *sy* (45b), and *sy* (46b) as subjunctives expressing a wish. They express the speaker's hope that other people, including her false husband, will suffer as she has done. Second, I take the pivotal conjunction *þæt* (47b) as introducing a clause of result, although that conjunction has temporal force as well in that it introduces the idea of a future time when the husband, too, will be exiled and at the mercy of the elements. Although some critics resist the idea that the speaker ever breaks out of the solipsism of the present tense,¹³⁶ I regard her as looking forward to a time of future payback when her husband will suffer as she has. Correspondingly, I interpret the three present indicative verbs *sitedð*, *drēogedð*, and *gemon* (47b, 50b, 51b) as having future force in clauses that look forward prophetically to a time when the husband, too, will sit in a state of bitter remembrance, possibly as a consequence of her curse. In addition, after long deliberation as to how to construe the singular nominal phrase *geong mon* in 42a and the other singular forms *him sylfum* (45b) and *his* (46a) with their attendant verbs, I think it best to follow Klinck in regarding these as 'gnomic singulars' that refer to *any young man whatever who proves false in love*. Indeed, what is more, the *geong mon* in question can be *any young person at all* whether of male or female sex. As I have stressed, the OE noun *mon* or *mann* is not gender-specific when used in a gnomic sense, and neither are the correlative personal pronouns *him* and *his*. The speaker hopes and trusts that anyone who betrays a lover will come to know what it is like to

¹³⁶ Green, 'Time, Memory, and Elegy', has perhaps most eloquently expressed the view that unlike the other elegies, *The Wife's Lament* never speaks of a future time different from the present. Instead, the poem 'presents a sense of time that is almost all pure subjectivity' (p. 129). If my reading of the grammar of these verbs is accepted, then this part of his argument has to be modified, although his point about subjectivity remains largely valid. Writing along comparable lines from a feminist perspective, Helen T. Bennett, 'Exile and the Semiosis of Gender in Old English Elegies', in *Class and Gender in Early English Literature*, ed. by Britton J. Harwood and Gillian R. Overing (Bloomington, IN, 1994), pp. 43–58, sees a blurring of the boundaries between time and timelessness in both *The Wife's Lament* and *Wulf and Eadwacer*: 'Woven in among discrete events is the collapse of linear time, in what Kristeva calls women's time, which is cyclical and non-linear' (p. 52). Perhaps. It might be useful, all the same, to distinguish between the perspective of the speakers of what Bennett calls 'the women's poems' from the perspective of the authors of those poems, who may have wished to characterize those speakers in a certain manner, e.g. as emotive rather than philosophical in their response to misfortune. All the Exeter Book elegies engage with time present, time past, and time future within the implied (or explicit) framework of Christian belief.

suffer pain like hers. At the same time, by this stage in the monologue it should be clear who in particular is on the woman's mind. Any reflections she may have about lovers in general, or about the human condition in general, take their cue from the suffering that she has endured on account of the particular *geong mon* who was her sworn lover but who has now apparently abandoned her.

The woman's preoccupation with that man ought to be evident from the echo effect of the whole-verse formula *blīfe gebāro* that occurs at 21a and again at 44a. While in the second instance the phrase may refer to anyone who maintains a forced cheerfulness, when it first appears it refers specifically to the woman's husband in his happier days. A stylistic link thus eases the transition from the general wish of lines 42–47a (beginning 'A scyle geong mon wes an geomormod') to the personal venom that animates lines 47b–52a (beginning 'þæt min freond siteð'). If my understanding of this latter passage is correct, the woman first wishes ill on all false lovers. She then contemplates, evidently with some satisfaction, how miserable her own husband will be (*mīn frēond* 'my lover', 47b, in grammatical apposition with *wine* 'husband, protector', 49a) once he, too, becomes an outcast. The monologue concludes, as we have seen, with a summary reflection on the lot of anyone who is physically cut off from his or her beloved (52b–53).

A modern English paraphrase of the passage that was my starting point (lines 42–53, reproduced at p. 157 above) can now be attempted, even if its quicksand-smooth surface obscures several points where philology can find no firm footing. After having puzzled long over the phrase *heard heortan gepoht* in verse 43a, for example, I have chosen to interpret it as a highly elliptical phrase that is governed by the same syntactical construction as in line 42. That is, I take the main verbal phrase *ā scyle wes an* still to be understood so as to yield in 43a the sense '[may the] thought of his heart [ever be] bitter'. A similar grammatical difficulty in the next four verses can be resolved by postulating similar ellipsis. Much as the verbal phrase *habban sceal* 'he must have' or 'he habitually has' (43b) takes as its object *blīfe gebāro* 'a blithe demeanor' (44a), the nominal forms *brēostceare* 'breast-care, grief' (44b) and *sinsorgna gedrēag* 'tumult of great or constant sorrows' (45a) are best construed as objects of an implied verbal phrase *habbe hē* 'may he have' (or, if one prefers, *habban sceal* 'he must have' or 'he habitually will have'). The grammar here is highly compacted. In 43b the relative pronoun construction *sē þe* should also probably be supplied to serve as the subject of *habban sceal*. While perhaps not strictly necessary, this grammatical supplement renders more readily understandable a train of thought that is otherwise difficult to trace. The paraphrase that follows is based on the foregoing understanding of the grammar of

lines 42–45a. It is punctuated so as to make sense in current English. Since the conjunction *þæt* ‘so that, until’ at 47b cannot introduce a new sentence, I have introduced a full stop and an exclamation point after 45b–46a (*sȳ æt him sylfum gelong . . .*) but not after verses 46b–47a (*sȳ ful wide fāh . . .*), which lead into a clause of result. The personal pronoun ‘he’ in its various inflected forms in the first four sentences of my paraphrase can be understood as referring to any false-hearted lover at all, regardless of sex, although the Wife’s false husband may be first in line for censure. Viewing the Wife as embittered, I take the liberty of suggesting that she speaks of her *wine* ‘lord, husband, protector’ in an ironic tone of voice, but that point is inessential.

Ever may a young person [of that treacherous kind] be wretched; ever may the thoughts of his heart be bitter! In like manner, may he who maintains a blithe demeanor also experience grief that cuts to the heart, a tumult of constant sorrows. May all his worldly joy depend on himself alone! May he be hated far and wide in some distant land, so that my lover, my ‘protector’, will sit beaten by an icy storm under a stony slope, desolate, drenched with rain in a dreary dwelling-place. My lord will come to know great trouble in mind. Too often will he recall a happier home. Sad is the lot of those who must wait in longing for their loved one!

With this offering of what is meant to be no better than a serviceable literal paraphrase of the last part of what has been called ‘this most difficult of poems’,¹³⁷ my task is almost done. One question is still worth posing, however.

Why, if this approach to the last part of *The Wife’s Lament* should be found persuasive, have so many modern editors and commentators opted for a genteel view of the speaker and her monologue? Why have they seen the woman’s rhetoric in the poem as philosophical, her situation as passive and pitiful, and her grief as nobly borne — as, indeed, most readers have seen the husband, too, as bearing up well in adversity?

Such questions touch on large issues in the history of sensibility. Without attempting to resolve them here, I would suggest that the speaker of *The Wife’s Lament* has at least one thing in common with her less abject counterpart Wealhtheow of *Beowulf*, in Friedrich Klaeber’s influential edition of that poem: namely, she is a woman diminished by kindness. In a recent article, Josephine Bloomfield has shown how Klaeber’s editorial treatment of Wealhtheow, in those passages where Hrothgar’s queen appears on the scene in Heorot, tends to gentrify her in a manner that is in keeping with the gender biases that were characteristic of the educated classes in Germany during Klaeber’s formative years.

¹³⁷ Fulk, *Eight Old English Poems*, p. 120.

The effect of Klaeber's decision to gloss five separate words that are used of Wealhtheow as 'kind' or 'kindness', while downplaying other aspects of their meaning, is to convert Wealhtheow from a strong 'peace weaver and power broker' to a 'tender maternal care-giver'.¹³⁸ Arguably, the speaker of *The Wife's Lament* has suffered a similar fate in the critical literature and has been converted from a dangerous, vindictive woman into something that more closely resembles an icon of bourgeois sensibility. Nice women don't curse. They are long-suffering. The thought that a woman could be so consumed by the grief and pain of broken vows as to want to call down woe on the head of her estranged husband is not one that seems to have appealed to any but a small number of modern readers. To acknowledge the existence — even, from an archaic perspective, the legitimacy — of the voice of the dangerously abjected woman is naturally disturbing.

If a certain amount of speculation and a giant step in the direction of my opponents' camp may be allowed, I would suggest that the unknown author of *The Wife's Lament* may have been aware of how that poem flirts with a situation that many readers, especially devout Christians and biological males, are likely to find disconcerting. The author may have wished to defuse the poem's explosive potential by leaving the door open to different responses. If this surmise is worth pursuing, then the last part of the poem need not be taken as the rhetoric of invective, nor need the passage be read as philosophical, either. Rather, it can be read as the rhetoric of deliberate ambiguity. After all, this is a mode of speech that is well known elsewhere in Old English literature. The obscene riddles of the Exeter Book display this mode to perfection, for they deliberately admit of two incompatible readings, one of them 'clean' and one of them 'dirty'.¹³⁹ The playfulness of the obscene riddle resides precisely in the way that it pulls the audience towards a 'dirty' solution that can then be denied by the 'clean' riddler.

¹³⁸ Josephine Bloomfield, 'Diminished by Kindness: Frederick Klaeber's Rewriting of Wealhtheow', *JEGP*, 93 (1994), 183–203.

¹³⁹ The obscene riddles have been translated as a group by Paull F. Baum, *Anglo-Saxon Riddles of the Exeter Book* (Durham, NC, 1963), pp. 57–60, and are analysed by Reinhard Gleissner, *Die 'zweideutigen' altenglischen Rätsel des Exeter Book in ihrem zeitgenössischen Kontext*, Sprache und Literatur, 23 (Frankfurt am Main, 1984). They are edited together with the other riddles, with commentary, by Williamson and are translated by Williamson in *A Feast of Creatures: Anglo-Saxon Riddle-Songs* (Philadelphia, 1982). In Williamson's numeration these are riddles 23, 35, 42, 43, 52, 59, and 60 (corresponding to K-D 25, 37, 44, 45, 54, 61, and 62, respectively). Commentators do not necessarily agree with one another as to just which riddles fall into this category.

In short, this subgenre derives much of its humour from the way it exploits the rhetoric of entrapment, an art that is related to the rhetoric of innuendo but makes for better sport.

To turn back to *The Wife's Lament*: if the author of that poem was biologically male, as he may well have been,¹⁴⁰ and if in addition he was a member of the clergy, as is more than likely, then that person would have been attuned to the discomfort that a poem of this kind could cause in its readers. Specifically, the author would have been aware of ecclesiastical censures of anyone who is *wearg-cwadol*, or 'given to evil speaking or cursing'. Either he or a copyist or a compiler may naturally have been nervous about including even a fictive treatment of such a taboo subject in a manuscript designed for an ecclesiastical library. Perhaps one reason why the grammar of the poem admits of several different interpretations is to allow, without danger of the work's being censured, for varying responses to the monologue to emerge on the part of different readers or listeners. To one member of the poet's audience, the woman's passionate outburst might seem excessive and could be taken as evidence of her moral or spiritual degradation. To another reader, her desire to see her husband suffer might be an apt response to the outrage she has had to endure. A third reader might deny the existence of a curse at all, preferring to see some other grammar at work in this passage, much as St Jerome and St Augustine preferred on a priori grounds to read Psalm 108, not as a string of curses, but rather as a set of prophecies of what would happen to Judas after his betrayal of Christ, for 'Scripture forbids cursing'.¹⁴¹ By stimulating responses of such different kinds, a poem of this character could have served as a focal point for debate among the members of an Anglo-Saxon textual community, just as it has stimulated discussion among scholars and teachers of Old English ever since the time of its first editor, Benjamin Thorpe.¹⁴²

¹⁴⁰ The attribution of male versus female authorship to any of the Exeter Book poems other than Cynewulf's two signed poems *Christ II* and *Juliana* is pure guesswork. In 'Old English Poetry: The Question of Authorship', *ANQ*, n.s., 3 (1990), 59–64, Fred C. Robinson has raised the possibility that the unknown authors of many Old English poems were women. This point must remain speculative. Marilyn Desmond, 'The Voice of Exile: Feminist Literary History and the Anonymous Anglo-Saxon Elegy', *Critical Inquiry*, 16 (1990), 572–90, discusses what constitutes 'women's literature' (as opposed to authorship by women) in Old English literature.

¹⁴¹ Little, *Benedictine Maledictions*, pp. 94–99, discusses the patristic resistance to understanding biblical imprecations as such.

¹⁴² Thorpe first edited the poem in 1842. Brian Stock has developed the concept of the 'textual community' in his influential writings about orality and literacy during the Middle

If one wishes to seek out an anthropological parallel to what may be an instance of the rhetoric of ambiguity in the closing part of *The Wife's Lament*, then it is worth turning to Africa again. In his essay 'Sanza, a Characteristic Feature of Zande Language and Thought', Evans-Pritchard calls attention to an example of language that is potentially offensive and so is expressed in double-edged terms.¹⁴³ Referring to his book *Witchcraft, Oracles, and Magic among the Azande*, he first characterizes the Zande mind as 'a suspicious, distrustful, hostile mind' and then comes to grips with a word, *sanza*, that bears two curiously disconnected meanings: 'parable, proverb' and 'spite, hate, envy, jealousy'.¹⁴⁴ The essence of *sanza* is that criticism of another person is expressed through words that can be taken to be innocent (that is, as proverbial or gnomic) so that the dangerous intent of the communication is masked. *Sanza* is thus a cover for comments that might cause offence if spoken directly. It is a language of innuendo, not entrapment. Specifically, we are told, there is 'much *sanza* in making love',¹⁴⁵ for it is well known that lovers are easily offended. Evans-Pritchard stresses that 'the *sanza* way of speech fits in [. . .] with the dominant feature of Zande philosophy, the witchcraft motif',¹⁴⁶ for a Zande tends to attribute all misfortunes to the ill will of others. Reference to *sanza* in the course of an analysis of *The Wife's Lament* might be thought capricious given the manifest differences that exist between medieval Europe and tribal Africa.¹⁴⁷ On the other

Ages, including part 2 (pp. 88–240) of *The Implications of Literacy: Written Language and Models of Interpretation in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries* (Princeton, NJ, 1983), and ch. 7 (pp. 140–58) of *Listening for the Text: On the Uses of the Past* (Baltimore, MD, 1990). The point of my discussion of the possible rhetoric of ambiguity in *The Wife's Lament* should not be confused with Belanoff's purposes in her article 'Women's Songs, Women's Language'. Working from a feminist perspective, Belanoff seeks to identify polysemous or indeterminate language as pre-symbolic and identifies it with strong emotion, the female voice, and the incommunicable.

¹⁴³ E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *Essays in Social Anthropology* (London, 1962), ch. 9 (pp. 204–28).

¹⁴⁴ Evans-Pritchard, *Essays*, p. 221, defines *sanza* as 'a circumlocutory form of speech or action in which words and gestures have hidden meanings different from their manifest meanings and generally malicious'. Closely related to the concept of *sanza* is the concept of 'signifying' in African-American tradition, as is discussed for example by Henry Louis Gates, Jr, *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (New York, 1988).

¹⁴⁵ Evans-Pritchard, *Essays*, p. 215.

¹⁴⁶ Evans-Pritchard, *Essays*, p. 227.

¹⁴⁷ The self-evident differences between the two cultures has not prevented Jeff Opland from calling fruitful attention to southern Africa as a source for comparative evidence bearing

hand, a glance at *sanza* allows one to see how the rhetorical phenomenon of 'deliberate malicious ambiguity' relates more generally to the mentality of witchcraft and cursing. Although this comparative perspective need not have a bearing on how one understands *The Wife's Lament*, it could be taken to support a case that the syntactical ambiguities that have caused such debate in the modern reception of that poem have their origin neither in scribal bungling nor in readerly ineptitude, but rather in the author's self-defensive strategy. I do not wish to argue that case myself, for I am felicitous in the 'curse' reading even if that reading is not felicitous to others, but I put it forward as a possibility worth taking into account.

The Wife's Lament is a literary fiction, of course, not a speech act that might immediately offend real persons. The poem forms one part of that mostly decorous anthology of writings known as the Exeter Book. Generic expectations therefore play a part in its reception, as does the placing of that poem in a specific sequence among other works. Indeed, consideration of the poem in its manuscript context may make a difference to our understanding. If *The Wife's Lament* is read in conjunction with such poems as *The Wanderer* (fols 76^v–78^r) and *The Husband's Message* (fol. 123^{r-v}), for example, then readers are likely to conclude that grief is not a female prerogative, that human beings of either sex are equally subject to the blows of fortune, and that not every man is as fickle in love as the woman's husband has proven to be. In addition, numerous devotional poems that are included in the Exeter Book (including *The Seafarer*, fols 81^v–83^r) raise the point that there exist consolations in the hereafter that can compensate for one's sufferings on earth. The Wife's silence concerning the afterlife can thus be taken as a part of her characterization rather than as evidence of theological ignorance or torpor on either her part or the author's. While no problem in the interpretation of a poem can be resolved by appeal to other texts, a reading of *The Wife's Lament* in its manuscript context can enrich one's appreciation for the way in which the author of this poem uses the form of a dramatic monologue, not only to encourage sympathy for a woman's imagined sufferings, but also to characterize that person as *one specific individual suffering one unique fate*. The worst of all readings of the poem, it seems to me, would be one that takes her to be a type of femininity or of the human race. The speaker of the

on Anglo-Saxon verse, particularly with regard to the genre of praise poetry, in many publications since 'Imbongi Nezibongo: The Xhosa Tribal Poet and the Contemporary Poetic Tradition', *PMLA*, 90 (1975), 185–208, and 'On Anglo-Saxon Poetry and the Comparative Study of Oral Poetic Traditions', *Acta Germanica*, 10 (1977), 49–62.

poem thus emerges, in the end, as a figure to whom individual readers can have very different responses, all of them legitimate, depending on their personal world view and values.

Whatever degree of sympathy she may inspire on the part of modern readers, the outcast, dishonoured speaker of *The Wife's Lament* is represented as someone who scarcely seems capable of breaking beyond the bounds of her own tormented experience. She seems inured to suffering to the point of being almost satisfied in the terrible potency of her grief. She expresses no desire either for a return to her former state of grace or for the supernal consolations that are implicit in *The Wanderer* and that are offered so persuasively in *The Seafarer* and the literature of the Anglo-Saxons as a whole. As Martin Green has remarked with perhaps only slight exaggeration, the woman seems hopeless, 'suspended in time', locked in a subjectivity from which she can conceive of no escape.¹⁴⁸ Perhaps the woman's long incarceration in the prison-house of her own suffering is in part what has led some critics to see in her a literal revenant, or even a damned soul inhabiting a literal grave, 'a gloomy place of perpetual confinement' where she has nothing to do but lament her own cursed state.¹⁴⁹ Be that as it may, the speaker's voice seems to emanate from what Kristeva calls a life lived in a terrible and terrifying state of abjection, 'on the edge of non-existence and hallucination'.¹⁵⁰ Her anguished voice deserves our attention precisely because it does not chime with the voices of consolation that are heard so often in medieval literature. The monologue that she speaks presents no *consolatio philosophiae*, no *consolatio fidei*, and not even very much of a *consolatio poesis*, for verse is her medium but not her source of redemption.

In sum, although some readers are likely to continue to regard *The Wife's Lament* as a tender lament that tells of the sorrows of separated lovers, I believe I have shown grounds for reading it, on the contrary, as an imagined *cri de coeur* that wells up from the depths of loneliness and pain and finds eventual expression in a curse directed against the speaker's estranged husband. The poem can be read as an exercise in primitivism, as well, for the woman's passionate, vengeance-driven cry is presented as if it pertained not to the relatively cosmopolitan England of the late tenth century, when the Exeter Book was written out, but rather to a more raw and primitive past that furnished the Anglo-Saxons with

¹⁴⁸ Green, 'Time, Memory, and Elegy', pp. 129–30.

¹⁴⁹ William C. Johnson, Jr, 'The Wife's Lament as Death-Song', in *Old English Elegies*, ed. by Green, pp. 69–81 (p. 76).

¹⁵⁰ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 2.

many of their reveries and some of their nightmares as well. The Wife's curse challenges modern readers to rethink their assumptions regarding what emotional responses are to be regarded as a feminine norm, or still more generally a civilized norm, when marriage vows are broken and a union that had seemed to offer a person comfort and security is dissolved, leaving that person outcast, shamed, and alone. The Wife's voice may or may not be regarded as exemplary, but it is one that demands to be heard.

MORE ON CURSES IN THE NORTHERN WORLD

The preceding chapter is less than a model of brevity, as my friends will be aware and others will be quick to point out. When it was published in the form of an article, some topics were left out because of constraints of space. Among those is the theme of cursing in the Old Norse context.

Although that theme is too large to treat with justice here as well, it should be mentioned as a way of acknowledging the intimate connections between Vikings and Anglo-Saxons during the whole of the Anglo-Scandinavian period (c. AD 850–1035). The lay *Skírnismál*, from the Elder Edda, can serve as a good example both of the theme of cursing and of those interconnections.¹

Skírnismál tells how the god Freyr, acting through his servant Skírnir, is smitten with desire for the fair giantess Gerðr and uses every conceivable technique of persuasion in an attempt to win her over. Bribes are of no use. Threats of physical violence fall flat. Freyr wins the day, however, by uttering a long and powerful curse detailing the girl's fate if she continues to spurn him (stanzas 26–36). Speaking through his messenger Skírnir,² the god assures Gerðr that if she persists in her refusals, she will become a miserable and loathsome creature, consumed by lust but abhorred by all prospective lovers.

¹ *The Poetic Edda*, vol. II: *Mythological Poems*, ed. and trans. by Ursula Dronke (Oxford, 1997), pp. 376–85, with commentary on pp. 386–414. A brief account of the poem is given by Stephen A. Mitchell, 'Skírnismál', in *Medieval Scandinavia*, pp. 596–97.

² In this regard, *Skírnismál* might be said to represent a Nordic parody of the situation in the OE poem *The Husband's Message*, which likewise is built on the attempt of a go-between to persuade a woman to accept a male suitor (who in this case is no love-smitten god but rather her exiled husband or betrothed). Each poem is the product of a separate tradition, however, and there is no need to read one in terms of the other.

Skírnir's long and highly elaborate 'prospective curse' of Gerðr (prospective because it remains at the level of threat only) has been linked by Joseph Harris to the commonplace curse that clinches the recipe for recovering stolen cattle in Old English metrical charm 9. The link here is the theme of cursing with a thistle. If Gerðr persists in refusing Freyr's suit, she is told, she will burst like 'a brittle autumn thistle about to burst with its load of seed' (in Harris's reading of this part of the eddic lay). Similarly, the thief who is addressed in the Old English charm is called upon to waste away and be as brittle (that is, as dried up) as a thistle.³ Nor is this the only connection that can be made between this poem and works of Old English literature. As has been mentioned in the previous chapter, Peter Orton has linked *Skírnismál* to *The Wife's Lament* and has made the plausible suggestion that the curse that looms over Gerðr may reflect pagan rituals of exclusion that also find a reflex in the gloomy details of the setting of the Exeter Book poem.⁴ Orton's point must remain speculative, of course, in part because it depends on how one construes the poet's description of the Wife's abode.

While the theme of cursing in *Skírnismál* could be discounted on the grounds that it is no more than a comic device, there can be no doubt that curses were taken seriously in ancient Scandinavia. A number of rune-stones from Denmark and neighbouring parts of Europe are carved with inscriptions that, in a manner reminiscent of book-theft curses, conclude with a curse intended to harm anyone who dares to damage or move the stone. Although the language of these curses is notoriously difficult to construe, Erik Moltke cites a set of examples where anyone who violates the injunction against moving the stone is apparently threatened with being branded a *seiðmaðr* 'warlock' or, in a sexually perverse twist on that phrase, with being called (or even turned into?) an *arg* woman, that is to say 'a woman who deals in black magic'.⁵

Epigraphical evidence of a comparable kind is known from Anglo-Saxon England. As one would expect, absent from it is the theme of sexual abuse. A Christian 'curse' inscription is part of the design of the Sutton brooch, a

³ Joseph Harris, 'Cursing with the Thistle: "*Skírnismál*" 31, 6–8, and OE Metrical Charm 9, 16–17', *NM*, 76 (1975), 26–33, repr. with additional comments in *The Poetic Edda: Essays on Old Norse Mythology*, ed. by Paul Acker and Carolyne Larrington (London, 2002), pp. 79–93 (p. 82).

⁴ See the preceding chapter (p. 152, notes 7–8).

⁵ Erik Moltke, *Runes and their Origin, Denmark and Elsewhere* (Copenhagen, 1985), at pp. 140–43, 226–28, and 231–36.

handsomely decorated ornament of the late Anglo-Saxon period that was recovered in 1694 in the region of the Isle of Ely, East Anglia. On the inner rim of the brooch is a jingle, inscribed in roman characters, that reads as follows when printed out as verse. The brooch ‘speaks’ in its own voice, in yet another variation upon the rhetorical device of prosopopoeia of which the Anglo-Saxons were so fond:

Æduwen me ag; age hyo drihten.
Drihten hine awerie ðe me hire ætferie,
buton hyo me selle hire agenes willes.⁶

(Ædwine owns me; may the Lord preserve her. May the Lord curse anyone who takes me from her, unless she gives me of her own free will.)

While the Sutton brooch is silent on the topic of witches and warlocks and includes no sexual taunt, the device of the ‘curse-inscribed speaking object’ is recognizable here, made innocent for Christian readers.

In regard to the power of cursing as in so many other respects, it seems, Norsemen and Anglo-Saxons spoke nearly the same language.

⁶ R. I. Page, ‘The Inscriptions’, in D. M. Wilson, *Anglo-Saxon Ornamental Metalwork* (London, 1964), pp. 86–87. The Sutton brooch is pictured as plate 83 of that book. In reprinting Page’s text I have normalized the spellings *w* and *v*. The translation, which is my own, is based on Page’s reading of this text as an example of alliterative verse. The rhetorical device of prosopopoeia that is employed here was a favourite one among the Anglo-Saxons and is evidenced in both epigraphy and poetry. E. G. Stanley, ‘The Late Saxon Disc-Brooch from Sutton (Isle of Ely): Its Verse Inscription’, in his *A Collection of Papers with Emphasis on Old English Literature* (Toronto, 1987), pp. 400–08, gives helpful background information and discusses the brooch’s inscription as an example of occasional verse. E. V. Thornbury, ‘The Genre of the Sutton Brooch Verses’, *N&Q*, n.s., 48 (2001), 375–77, addresses the manner in which the inscription resembles the sanction curses in Anglo-Saxon wills and charters.

THE TRICK OF THE RUNES IN *THE HUSBAND'S MESSAGE*

The Old English poem known as *The Husband's Message* begins in the same minimalist style as is typical of a number of poems of the Exeter Book. A first-person speaker, an 'I', begins speaking without any context for speech yet being established, without any self-introduction, and without as yet any known purpose: 'Nu ic onsundran þe secgan wille' (Now I wish to have a word apart with you).¹ As with the Exeter Book elegies known as *The Seafarer*, *The Wife's Lament*, and *Wulf and Eadwacer*, just as with all fifty Exeter Book riddles that are put into the first person singular voice,² there is an implied challenge for the reader to discover who the speaker is and to fill out his or her story. The poem thus begins with a small enigma. It is easy to tell that we are in the midst of that part of the Exeter Book that consists of close to one hundred riddles interspersed by a small miscellany of other poems, several of which are riddle-like in their resistance to easy interpretation.³

¹ In this chapter, unless stated otherwise, quotations of *The Husband's Message* (sometimes here abbreviated *HbM*) and other Exeter Book poems are from Muir. The text of *HbM* is given in Muir, I, 354–56, Muir's commentary in II, 644–98. An alternative translation to the one that I have provided for line 1 might be: 'Now I, apart from you, wish to say.' That possibility is virtually ruled out by the subsequent development of the monologue, however, for the speaker is clearly imagined to be in the presence of the second person, who is repeatedly the object of direct address (in 10a, 12a, 13a, 14a, etc.).

² I follow the count of Tupper, p. lxxxix.

³ These poems include such enigmatic pieces as *Deor* (fol. 100^{r-v}), *Wulf and Eadwacer* (fols 100^v–101^r), *The Wife's Lament* (fol. 115^{r-v}), and *The Ruin* (fols 123^v–124^v). In 'Exeter Book Riddle 74 and the Play of the Text' (at pp. 12–13 above), I discuss the immediate manuscript context

The enigma of the human drama that begins to unfold in line one of the poem is intensified by the fact that the person who is the object of the speaker's direct address is identified only by the second-person singular personal pronoun *þu* 'thou' or 'you'. Who is this person, we may well ask? A friend or kinsman of the speaker? What relationship between the two parties is implied or assumed?⁴ And why is such an emphasis put on secrecy, on covert speech? As readers, we are at once drawn into the role of eavesdroppers overhearing two persons engaged in what seems like an intimate conversation.

The air of mystery that permeates the beginning of the poem is not dispelled if we shift our attention all the way to its end. Getting to that endpoint, however, presents unusual difficulties for anyone who consults the poem in its unique manuscript copy, for the recto and verso of Exeter Book folio 123, which contain the whole text of *The Husband's Message*, are marred by a burn-hole that obliterates numerous words and letters, thereby adding an inadvertent dimension to the poem's cryptic character (see Figs 6 and 7).⁵ Nor is that the last difficulty to be faced by the reader of the poem in the original manuscript. Although a modern consensus holds that all fifty-four lines of *The Husband's Message* constitute a single dramatic monologue, on two occasions before the poem's close the scribe interjects full end-stop punctuation followed by majuscule letters, thus marking out the text into three segments that would normally be read as three independent poems.⁶ If we ignore this erratic punctuation, which is best taken

of *HbM* (p. 13) and follow Klinck, esp. pp. 25–26, 47–49, and 56–58, in identifying that poem and others of the so-called elegies as riddle-like in various degrees.

⁴ Indeed, this person might well be called the 'mute implied interlocutor', for the poem consists of nothing but the first speaker's monologue.

⁵ Since much of the content of lines 2–6 and 36–40 is no longer visible in the manuscript, printed editions of those parts of the poem are littered by ellipses, dashes, or conjectural readings set between square brackets. I shall work under the assumption that nothing that would affect one's basic understanding of the monologue has been lost, and except as will be set forth specifically, the present analysis is not based on conjectural restorations of the kind that have been supplied so ingeniously by John Collins Pope, 'Paleography and Poetry: Some Solved and Unsolved Problems of the Exeter Book', in *Mediaeval Scribes, Manuscripts and Libraries: Essays Presented to N. R. Ker*, ed. by M. B. Parkes and Andrew G. Watson (London, 1978), pp. 25–65 (at pp. 42–63). Klinck prints facsimiles of the elegies (including *HbM*) in the prefatory pages of her edition.

⁶ This superfluous punctuation appears first in the right margin of the sixteenth line of fol. 123^r (as can be seen in Figure 6), then in the right margin of the third line of fol. 123^v (Figure 7). These junctures correspond to the line breaks at lines 12–13 and 25–26, respectively, of printed

as the result of a scribe's misunderstanding of a text that has always posed difficulties for its readers, then what we eventually come upon is the following concluding passage, here cited in customary modern lineation and with the text as edited by Muir, with special characters transliterated:

[. . .] Gehyre ic ætsomne .**S.R.** geador
.EA.W. ond **.M.** aþe benemnan,
 þæt he þa wære ond þa winetreowe
 be him lifgendum læstan wolde,
 þe git on ærdagum oft gespræconn. (lines 50–54)⁷

(I hear **S-R**, **EA-W**, and **M** gathered together, named with an oath that for his whole life, he has wished to uphold the pledge and the pact of amity that you two have often declared in former days.)

It would be hard to devise a more deliberately enigmatic ending than this, one might think.⁸ How is one to construe the special characters that are embedded

editions. Muir suggests that 'the scribe may have believed that he was dealing with three riddles here, given the immediate manuscript context' (I, 354–55, n. 12), for immediately preceding *HbM* is Riddle 60 (*Ic wæs be sonde*), while directly following it are first the poem known as *The Ruin* and then Riddles 61–94. I accept the current consensus that Riddle 60 and *HbM* are two independent poems rather than forming parts of a single composition, as has sometimes been thought, e.g. by F. A. Blackburn, 'The Husband's Message and the Accompanying Riddles of the Exeter Book', *JEGP*, 3 (1901), 1–13. The independence of the two poems has been demonstrated by Roy F. Leslie, 'The Integrity of Riddle 60', *JEGP*, 67 (1968), 451–57.

⁷ Muir, I, 356 (lines 50–54). This passage presents two unrelated textual problems that are best mentioned at once. First, the grammar of the preterite verb *wolde* (53b) resists translation into modern English. While that verb would seem to refer first of all to the speaker's constancy up to the present time, it can also be taken as a preterite subjunctive form in a dependent clause, thus referring to the constancy that he intends to maintain in the future (*be him lifgendum*). Line 53 can thus equally well be rendered in the present tense: 'for as long as he lives, he intends to uphold' the pledge that he has often spoken. Second, the reading of the fifth of the five special characters is potentially subject to dispute. Although the character looks like a **D**-rune, most editors construe it as an **M**-rune meaning *mann* 'man'. The existence of a very similarly misdrawn **M**-rune in line 23 of *The Ruin* (fol. 124^r of the Exeter Book), where reference is made to *meodoheall monig* **ᛞ** *dreama full* 'many a meadhall full of human delights' (with indisputable reference to the OE noun *mann-drēam*), leads naturally to this view. Exeter Book Riddle 19 provides a second example; see Klinck, the last of her prefatory plates. For a recent attempt to interpret *HbM* that hinges on taking the last of the special characters as the **D**-rune, see Teresa Fiocco, 'Le rune ne *Il messaggio del marito*', *Linguistica e Filologia*, 10 (1999), 67–85.

⁸ Taken by itself this passage resembles one of the Exeter Book riddles. Compare the riddling strategy of riddles 19 and 24, each of which is solved as soon as one deciphers the runes as defamiliarized letters of the standard insular script and arranges those letters in an order that

in this passage? Whatever the characters may signify, they seem to encode the main point of the speaker's monologue. They have every appearance of being a key by which the enigma of the poem's narrative is to be unlocked.

Adding to one's uncertainty concerning how to interpret the last lines of the poem is a textual crux in verse 50a, *gehyre ic ætsomne*, as that verse is read by Muir, among others.⁹ Is the speaker who is imagined to have spoken the whole of the preceding monologue now claiming that he (or she, or it) hears certain special characters being sounded out together? That is what verse 50a must mean if one accepts the reading *gehyre*, supplying what is thought to be an original medial consonant *h* where the manuscript shows evidence of an erasure and a correction. It is not wholly clear, however, how the speaker would be 'hearing' runes at the same time as he is uttering the speech in question. Alternatively, some editors accept what appears to be the scribe's corrected reading *gecyre* and, with some semantic liberty, take that word (which normally would be spelled *gecyrrre*, from *gecyrran* normally meaning 'to turn') to mean that the speaker is 'conjoining' certain signs.¹⁰ As a third alternative, Robert Kaske and others have argued for the reading *genyrye* and have interpreted that word to mean that the speaker is 'constraining' the signs to speak their oracular message or is physically 'crowding [them] together' on a piece of wood.¹¹ Although my eyes are inclined to see *gecyre* at this point, I have no confidence in that reading or either of the other two. In this study, no weight will be put on a doubtful construction of a word that seems to have confused the scribe.

makes satisfactory sense. A similar riddling strategy is employed in Cynewulf's four runic signatures, each of which is encoded near the end of the poem in which it occurs much as the runes of *HbM* are embedded in that poem's close, as is discussed below. On the art of those runic riddles and signatures, see Page, pp. 186–99. I wish to express my unbounded admiration for Page's witty and learned discussion of all aspects of Anglo-Saxon runology. All Anglo-Saxonists who worry over the runes are deeply in his debt, even if on occasion their interpretation of individual points may depart from his, as is inevitable in terrain as difficult as this.

⁹ Muir, 1, 356. The reading *gehyre* was proposed by Moritz Trautmann, 'Zur Botschaft des Gemahls', *Anglia*, 16 (1894), 207–25 (at pp. 218–19) and has been accepted by R. F. Leslie, *Three Old English Elegies: The Wife's Lament, The Husband's Message, The Ruin*, 2nd edn (Exeter, 1988), p. 50, and E. M. Bridle, *Four Old English Poems* (Armidale, 1998), p. 18.

¹⁰ This is the reading adopted by Krapp and Dobbie, p. 227. For further discussion of the editorial choices here, see Klinck, pp. 206–07 (n. on verse 50a).

¹¹ Robert E. Kaske, 'The Reading *Genyrye* in *The Husband's Message*, Line 49', *MÆ*, 33 (1964), 204–06. Kaske's reading is accepted, with slightly different justification, by Stanley B. Greenfield, *The Interpretation of Old English Poems* (London, 1972), p. 152.

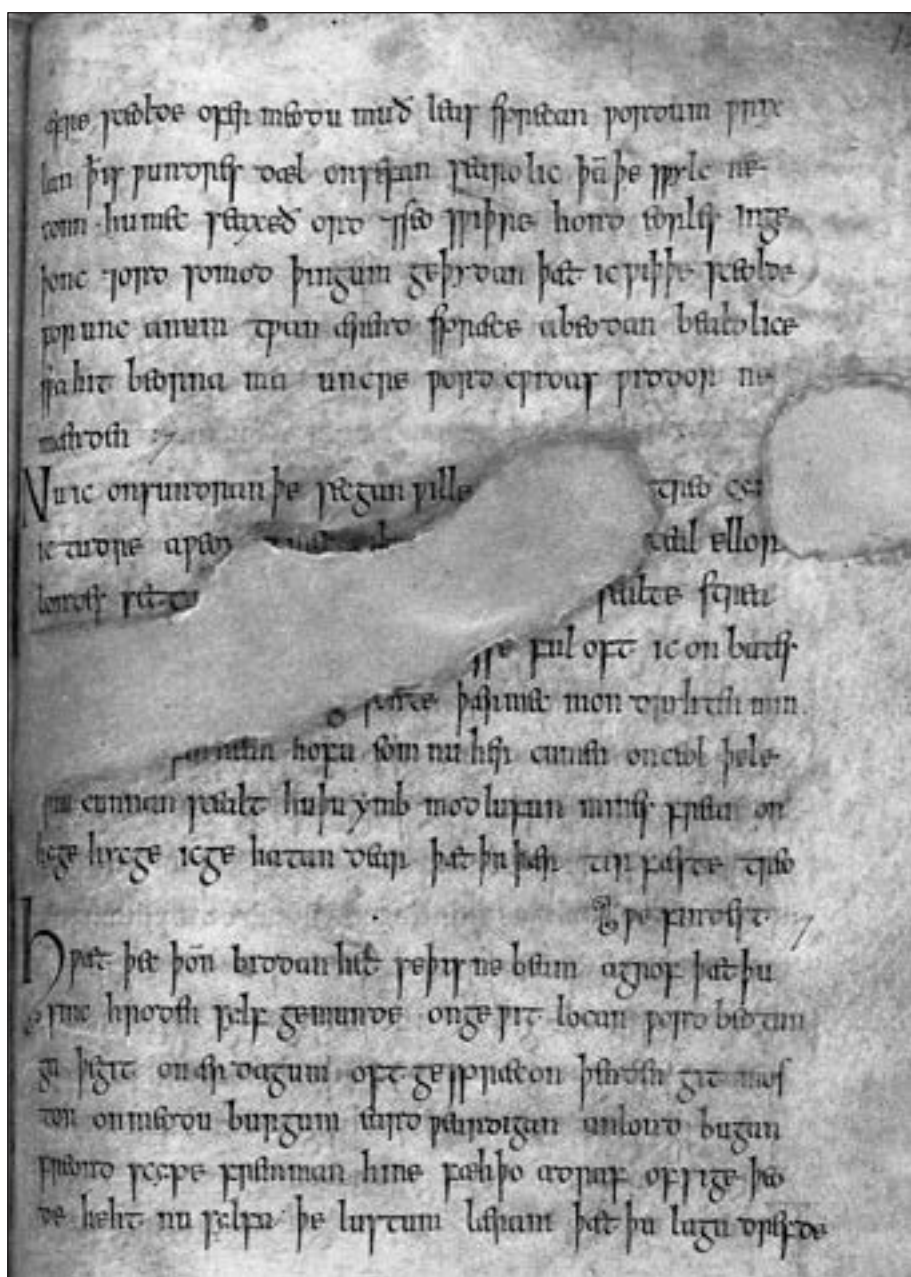


Figure 6. The beginning of *The Husband's Message*.
 Exeter, Cathedral Library, MS 3501, fol. 123^r.

The essential prerequisite towards unpuzzling the special characters of *The Husband's Message* is to compare any modern edition with the original manuscript page (or a facsimile of it; see Fig. 7, line 4 from the bottom). As written out by the Exeter Book scribe, the special characters stand out by their large size as well as by the pointing that isolates each one. Most significantly, the characters appear to be runes. Or are they all runes, after all? That question deserves more attention than it has yet received.

Concerning three of the special characters, the ones transliterated above as **S**, **EA**, and **M**, there can be no doubt. They are three runes of the standard Anglo-Saxon futhorc, the ones that are customarily known as *sigel*, *ēar*, and *mann*.¹² Two of the other special characters, however, the ones represented above as **R** and **W**, are written with rounded rather than angular shapes. Now that a runic reading context for this group of lines has been established, a reader who wishes to do so can construe them as the runic letters customarily known as *rād* and *wynn*. If taken in isolation, however, they could be read as two letters of the standard insular script.¹³ Modern editions efface this distinction between the three runes and the two ambiguous characters of this passage by normalizing all five symbols either as a set of runes (as in the editions by Krapp and Dobbie, Klinck, and Bridle) or as letters that are understood to stand in for those runes (as in the editions by Muir and Leslie).¹⁴ As we shall see, all these editors may thereby be setting an obstacle in the reader's path. By normalizing the special characters in uniform typography, whether as runes or as roman letters standing in for runes, editors seem to be basing their presentation of the text on the assumption that knowledge of the runic alphabet is essential to the cracking of whatever code is used here. Readers of the poem will naturally adopt that same assumption. And yet runic lore may be in play in this passage only partially

¹² By 'customarily' I mean 'customarily in modern accounts of the runes'. We cannot necessarily be sure what the Anglo-Saxon names for the runes were. Some of those names are evident and beyond dispute (as with **M** *mann* 'man, person of either sex'). Some are not, as with **U** *sigel* (?) 'jewel', hence 'sun' (??) and, even more so, **Y** *ēar* (?) 'earth', hence 'grave' (??). See my extended discussion of this point in the next chapter, 'Runic Hermeneutics' (pp. 251–79 below), and note the similarly sceptical remarks of Lois Bragg, 'Runes and Readers: In and Around *The Husband's Message*', *SN*, 71 (1999), 34–50 (esp. p. 34).

¹³ The scribe is inconsistent in writing majuscule **R** and a letter that closely resembles minuscule **W**. Compare the shape of insular **W** as it is written in stylized majuscule to begin the bottom line of fol. 123^v (Fig. 7). That line introduces *The Ruin*.

¹⁴ In his textual note to line 50, Muir states this assumption outright: 'The uppercase letters S, R, EA, W, M are runes' (I, 356).

rather than crucially. In other words, as often happens in the context of riddling, the poet may have introduced a false lead to his puzzle, encouraging us to 'get runic' when a strong effort in that direction will only lead one astray. As with any red herring, if we are to succeed in solving the puzzle correctly we must resist the temptation to fish for it.

Adding to the induced difficulties of reading the last lines of *The Husband's Message* is the editorial suppression of a sixth special character. Between the last two special characters the scribe has written the tyronian *nota* 7, written out in the same bold manner and set off by similar pointing (see Fig. 7 again). In keeping with standard practice, modern editors silently expand that abbreviation to *ond*. Whether that practice is helpful here or not is open to debate. It may be an impediment to the reader, for silent editorial expansion of the abbreviation effaces its role in the visual riddle that meets the eye at the bottom of fol. 123^v. Obviously the tyronian *nota* is not a rune. It is a routine abbreviation that must be expanded to an ordinary word in order to be meaningful. But that fact may be a significant one. By including the tyronian *nota* among the special characters, the poet may be providing a clue as to the procedure that must be followed if the meaning of the other five special characters is to be discovered. Those other characters too, we may well suspect, are to be expanded into words rather than being construed as individual letters. Furthermore, those characters too might be meant to stand for ordinary English words rather than arcane ones. If this hypothesis is even partially correct, then there is little point in trying to read the special characters as individual letters that, scrabble-like, are to be reconstituted into a meaningful Anglo-Saxon word. Although cryptography of this kind is well attested elsewhere in the Old English records (indeed, an example of it is given shortly below), an attempt to read the special characters of *The Husband's Message* as if they spelled out a single keyword is bound to end in futility.¹⁵ **Swearm*, for example, may be a wonderful word in someone's invented language, but it was not one known to the Anglo-Saxons. The claim that I am making here is only a tentative one, of course. The hypothesis that the five symbols stand for

¹⁵ See most recently the attempt by Fiocco, 'Le rune ne *Il messaggio del marito*', to revive the claim, first made by W. Sedgefield in 1922, that inscribed in the poem is the word **SWEARD** (that is, *sword*) taking that word either literally to mean 'sword' (Sedgefield) or figuratively to signify 'phallus' (Fiocco). Bragg, 'Runes and Readers', states that the runic symbols in *HbM* 'are clearly to be understood as alphabetic characters that spell a word' (p. 38). Despite her confidence in this claim, she fails to discover what this word is, and so she is led to entertain the possibility that the passage is 'either faulty or fake', providing no more than 'alliterating gibberish' (p. 40).

five whole words rather than serving as letters that spell out a single word has to be measured against the results to which it leads.

A conclusion that can be drawn more firmly at this point is that the special characters of *The Husband's Message* constitute a deliberate challenge to the reader through a process of *runification*. By that awkward term I mean to denote the stratagem by which a message is encoded in letters that superficially look runic, although in fact they may be far from constituting a true runic inscription. To *runify* a text, in like manner, is to heighten the cryptic or arcane visual appearance of that text through manipulation of runes or rune-like characters in preference to the normal letters of the alphabet.¹⁶

As self-conscious displays of learning, acts of runic disguise are fairly common in the corpus of Anglo-Saxon writings. As is well known, early medieval scribes often inscribed individual runes or groups of runes on what are otherwise unremarkable manuscript pages. Rather than representing a use of runes by persons for whom that writing system was a living thing, such a practice often reflects the antiquarian interests of scribes who enjoyed manipulating various types of cryptic script.¹⁷ A well-known example of such a deployment of runes occurs in the copy of *Solomon and Saturn I* that is written out in CCCC, MS 422.¹⁸ This highly imaginative poem, the first part of which is also written out in CCCC,

¹⁶ As is noted by Raymond I. Page, 'Runic Writing, Roman Script and the Scriptorium', in *Runor och ABC: Elva föreläsningar från ett symposium i Stockholm, våren 1995*, ed. by Staffan Nyström (Stockholm, 1997), pp. 119–35, 'Runes could be used in contexts where they stand distinct from Roman [letters], for display and riddling/cryptic purposes, as an unusual and "learned" script, to make certain passages stand distinct' (p. 135). This 'display' function is the second of seven functions of runic script in Anglo-Saxon England that Page reviews in this article.

¹⁷ Such inscriptions are discussed in precise detail by R. Derolez, *Runica Manuscripta: The English Tradition*, Werken Uitgegeven door de Faculteit van de Wijsbegeerte en Letteren, 118 (Brugge, 1954), with addendum in *ES*, Supplement 45 (1964), 116–20, and further remarks in his 'Runica Manuscripta Revisited', in Bammesberger, pp. 85–106.

¹⁸ R. J. Menner, *The Poetical Dialogues of Solomon and Saturn* (New York, 1941), pp. 87–88; Dobbie, pp. 35–36. For additional discussion, see Frederick B. Jonassen, 'The Pater Noster Letters in the Poetic *Solomon and Saturn*', *Modern Language Review*, 83 (1988), 1–9, and Page, pp. 187–88. Page includes a partial facsimile of the passage from CCCC, MS 422. Facsimiles of the poem as it is written out in both manuscripts are included in *Old English Verse Texts from Many Sources: A Comprehensive Collection*, ed. by Fred C. Robinson and E. G. Stanley, Early English Manuscripts in Facsimile, 23 (Copenhagen, 1991), no. 12. For a general orientation to these curious works, see either of two articles by Katherine O'Brien O'Keeffe, s.v. 'Solomon and Saturn', in *Medieval England* and in *Blackwell Encyclopaedia*.

MS 41, celebrates the charismatic quality of the *pater noster* prayer by recounting how each letter of that prayer takes the part of a heroic warrior engaged in battle against the fiend. **P** strikes the enemy with its long staff or goad, **A** joins in to help knock the fiend down, **T** then stabs the enemy in the tongue, wrings his neck, and breaks his cheeks, and so on with the other letters that spell out the prayer. The scribe of CCCC, MS 422 (though not that of CCCC, MS 41) doubles each special letter by writing out not only its roman form but also, directly preceding it, the corresponding runic equivalent, with each rune marked out by special pointing. Praise of the *pater noster* thus gains additional force from the exotic shape of the runes. The letter **A** is doubled by the *āc* rune **ᚠ**, which might be thought to resemble a poker or goad of some kind. The square-topped roman letter **T** is doubled by the sharply angular *tīw* (or *tīr*) rune **ᚦ**, which visually resembles a spear point or arrow head.¹⁹ Only a superficial knowledge of runes is required for one to read this copy of the poem correctly, for what matters is the supplementary presence of the runes as an ostentatious display script with overtones of power (whether that power is imagined to derive from their visual alterity, their associations with magic, or their shape). Here, as has rightly been pointed out, the conventional names of the runes have no role to play: 'It is the letter's Latin name (e.g. *ess* rather than *sigel*) that is required by the alliteration.'²⁰

An example of more playful runification is found in the same general section of the Exeter Book where *The Husband's Message* is found. Riddle 19 (on fol. 105^v) begins with the line *Ic seah ·ᚱᚱᚱ· hygewloncne* 'I saw a high-spirited ·ᚱᚱᚱ·'.²¹ The enigma of this claim is solved when one transliterates the runic letters into their equivalent forms in the roman alphabet (**sroh**) and then reads them in reverse order (**hors**). The result of this elementary decoding procedure is the common OE noun denoting 'horse'. Muir's method of lineating the text, together with his augmentation of the first line of the riddle *metri causa* by the phrase *on sīpe* 'on his/its journey', somewhat obscures the riddling technique that is employed in this passage. Worth questioning is the assumption, shared by Muir and others, that the rune-names must be supplied here so as to yield two full alliterative lines of verse. All that is required to solve the puzzle aright is to

¹⁹ In a review of Jonassen's article published in *Old English Newsletter*, 23.1 (1989), 63, Katherine O'Brien O'Keeffe takes issue with that author's contention that the forms of the runic letters make a difference. In her view (which I do not happen to share), 'the martial activities of the letters have no identifiable connection to their written shapes'.

²⁰ Fulk and Cain, p. 168, drawing on a tradition of informed analysis of this passage.

²¹ For a facsimile, see Klinck, the last of her prefatory pages; cf. Muir, I, 298.

read the rune-staves (OE *rūn-stafas* 'runic letters') as defamiliarized roman letters, thus yielding a single alliterative line:

Ic seah hors hygewloncne, heafodbeorhtne

(I saw a high-spirited horse with shining head [or mane]).

Modern editors of Riddle 19 have a tendency to amplify the difficulties of this passage by assuming that two verse lines must be present, not just one.²² The same riddling strategy is followed three additional times in Riddle 19. The only runic lore that is required to solve these puzzles is a knowledge of which runes correspond to which roman letters. Given the visual resemblance of many runes to their roman counterparts, as well as the existence, dating from the Anglo-Saxon period and later, of a number of cryptographic lists in which runes and roman letters are presented side by side,²³ the challenge is not a strenuous one.

Runification can thus be regarded as a literary ploy, a special type of defamiliarization that appeals to writers who wish to cast a cloak of real or apparent mystery over their text. Since runes derive from a layer of culture older than the roman alphabet which Christian missionaries introduced to Britain at the end of the sixth century AD, an Anglo-Saxon text that has been runified has at the same time been rendered more antique. One could say that it has been *distressed*, in the sense in which the poet and literary scholar Susan Stewart uses that term.²⁴ Borrowing the verb *to distress* from the material sphere, where it denotes the finishing of furniture and similar objects so as to lend them the semblance of antiquity, Stewart uses the past participle of that verb to refer to examples of popular poetry, such as the epic and the ballad, that have often been given a deliberately antique appearance when presented to the modern reading public. An example of this practice is the text of the poem 'Edward' that was first published in Percy's *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (1765) and that is often reprinted in the medieval section of anthologies of English poetry as an example

²² Examples are Krapp and Dobbie, p. 189, and Williamson, p. 78 (his riddle no. 17). For discussion of this problematic instance of the literary use of runes, see Page, pp. 188–89. Although Page chafes at the idea that the rune-names are to be sounded out here ('taken like this they [the runes] do not make much sense', p. 188), he accepts Krapp and Dobbie's editing of this passage.

²³ Page, pp. 60–62. See more generally Page, ch. 5, '*Runica Manuscripta* and the Rune-Names' (pp. 60–79), and Derolez, *Runica Manuscripta*, esp. plates I, III, V, and VIII.

²⁴ Susan Stewart, 'Notes on Distressed Genres', *JAF*, 104 (1991), 5–31, published also as ch. 3 (pp. 66–101) of her book *Crimes of Writing: Problems in the Containment of Representation* (Oxford, 1991).

of ‘anonymous traditional balladry’. In Percy’s deluxe anthology, which was meant chiefly for the English market, this Scottish ballad text (which may have been composed for this occasion, or at any rate was produced in response to Percy’s quest for examples of medieval minstrelsy) is couched in antique northern orthography in a manner that recalls an earlier, more heroic age: ‘Quhy dois zour brand sae drap wi’ bluid? / And quhy sae sad gang zee, O?’ (Why does your sword so drip with blood, and why do you walk so sadly, O?)²⁵ The extreme orthographic archaisms that appear in this text (for example, *quhy* in place of standard English *why*) need not imply intimate knowledge of early Scottish literary dialect on the part of its unknown author. With distressed genres, all that is asked of the writer or editor is the ability to manipulate antique modes of writing for special effect. Similarly, all that is asked of readers of such poetry is that they know the script well enough to read through its superficial alterity.

As for the effect of the runification that plays a role in the poetic strategies of such poems as *Solomon and Saturn I*, Exeter Book Riddle 19, and *The Husband’s Message*, it adds to each poem a mystique that, while suggestive of a more primitive era, has little to do with a knowledge of runes as a system of writing. The isolated runes that are embedded in these poems are there for decorative purposes. They lend an air of secrecy without, I believe, really concealing any secrets. After all, it is in the nature of runes to provide an aura of mystery, for there exists ample evidence that the Anglo-Saxons and other Germanic peoples sometimes regarded runes as a kind of semi-secret script. As R. I. Page remarks in a summary of the meaning of the OE noun *rūn* and its cognates in the early languages of north-west Europe,

The Germanic words have meanings embodying the ideas of mystery and perhaps secrecy. Gothic *runa* glosses Greek *μυστήριον* in references to the divine mysteries, and a related Gothic *garuni* means ‘consultation, counsel’. Old High German uses *runa* and *giruni* in the same way. There is a group of related verbs, OE *runian*, OS [Old Saxon] *runon*, OHG [Old High German] *runen*, ‘whisper’. The ON [Old Norse] plural *rúnar* sometimes implies ‘secret lore, mysteries’. Old Irish *run* means ‘secret’, and Middle Welsh *rhin* ‘magical charm’. Finnish has *runo*, ‘song’, perhaps originally ‘incantation’. OE *run* has corresponding meanings. It translates *mysterium* in contexts dealing with spiritual mysteries. It can mean ‘council’ or ‘counsel’, pairing or contrasting with *ræd* [‘counsel, advice’] in alliterative lines. It carries a sense of secrecy, of

²⁵ Thomas Percy, *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry*, 3 vols (London, 1765), 1, 53–56, lines 3–4. Bertrand Harris Bronson discusses the literary character of this ballad text in “Edward, Edward: A Scottish Ballad” and a Footnote’, in his *The Ballad as Song* (Berkeley, CA, 1969), pp. 1–17.

isolation, sometimes of esoteric knowledge and even perhaps of secret scripts, symbols or messages.²⁶

What Page is referring to is the word *rūn* and its semantic range in its various cognate forms, not actual runic letters (OE *rūn-stafas*). There is no question, all the same, that when a set of runes is embedded in a passage of ordinary book-hand, most readers will conclude that what they are being confronted with is a secret or riddling communication of some kind, a locked door to which only select persons have the key. Indeed, it is this implied connection with the arcane and mysterious, touching on the magical, that still constitutes the lion's share of the popular appeal of runes.

The bearing of this point on *The Husband's Message* should perhaps be made explicit. In theory, runes represent arcane knowledge. In practice, however, not all the runic passages that figure in Old English literary manuscripts present a real challenge to the reader. In some instances, the use made of the runes is transparent. Sometimes runes serve as no more than an alternative way of writing roman letters. The really demanding question regarding the runes in *The Husband's Message*, I suggest, is not 'What do they say?' but rather 'Who speaks them?'

New and, I hope, felicitous answers to both those questions will be presented in the two following sections. To begin with, it will be helpful to review what information can be gleaned from the poem as a whole, taking care not to read into it any preconceptions.

The Speaker's Identity Revealed

The whole of *The Husband's Message* consists of a single monologue that is imagined to be uttered by an unidentified speaker, a messenger. The story that unfolds in the course of that monologue features two protagonists: first, an unnamed man of aristocratic stature who is the speaker's lord or master (*se þēoden* 'the nobleman', 29a) and second, the speaker's silent interlocutor, a woman who is of equally high rank (for she is referred to as a *þēodnes dohtor* 'nobleman's daughter, princess', 48a). The epithet *sinchroden* 'adorned with treasure' (14a) that is used of the woman further identifies her as a member of the aristocracy.

²⁶ Page, pp. 106–07. Also see B-T, s.v. *rūn*. Calling attention to scenes in Old English literature where learned authors write of the imagined use of runes in former pagan days, Seth Lerer, *Literacy and Power in Anglo-Saxon Literature* (Lincoln, NE, 1991), pp. 30–60 and elsewhere, discusses the nostalgic function of runes as features of an emergent Anglo-Saxon mythology of writing.

By birth, both protagonists are members of the same tribe (*sigepēod* ‘victorious people’, 20a) that inhabits a land bordering on the sea (8–9, 21, 26–28, 41–44). The homeland of these two people includes such conventional elements of a northern literary landscape as cliffs, woods, and cuckoos (22–23) as well as settlements where mead is served (*meoduburgum*, 17b). Although the man was exiled against his will (*hine fāhpo adraf* ‘a feud drove him out’, 19b; *nȳde gebāded* ‘compelled by necessity’, 41a), he has survived that mortal danger and is now pointedly referred to as a *lifgendne monn* ‘a living man’, 25b. With the blessing of God (32), he hopes to be reunited with the woman now that he has reestablished his fortune in his new home (*Nu se mon hafað / wean oferwunnen* ‘Now the man has overcome his hardship’, 44b–45a). He has no lack of gold, land, friends, horses, treasures, and the other good things of life; all that remains to make his happiness complete is for the woman to join him (35b–39a; 44b–48). Conveying what can be taken as either a command or a warm-hearted invitation, the speaker calls upon the woman to set out over the sea so as to join her man in his new homeland, there to take on a role as his equal partner in distributing gifts to their retainers (33–35a) as soon as the cuckoo has heralded the advent of spring (20b–23).

Although the role of the rune-like characters in this extended example of what has been called the ‘rhetoric of persuasion’²⁷ is not made explicit, what is clear is that the letters are associated with renewal of an oath (*gebēot*, 49a) that the man and the woman had repeatedly pledged to one another. The speaker links the two protagonists rhetorically as if they were still a couple (*git* [...] *oft gespræconn* ‘the two of you often spoke’, 54; dual personal pronouns are also introduced in 16a, 17a, 32a, and 49b). The woman is assured that with these special characters serving as a sign of either the messenger’s authenticity or the man’s fidelity, or both these things,²⁸ the man is now earnestly renewing his vow. We are left to imagine just what the nature of that vow was. Most readers take it to have been a marriage vow, hence the modern title *The Husband’s Message*. Other readers,

²⁷ Earl R. Anderson, ‘*The Husband’s Message*: Persuasion and the Problem of Genyrye’, *ES*, 56 (1975), 289–94 (p. 291).

²⁸ Stanley B. Greenfield refers to the runes, which he takes to be carved on a rune-stick, as an ‘authenticating document’ in his essay ‘The Old English Elegies’, in *Continuations and Beginnings: Studies in Old English Literature*, ed. by E. G. Stanley (London, 1966), pp. 142–75, repr. in his *Hero and Exile: The Art of Old English Poetry*, ed. by George H. Brown (London, 1989), pp. 93–123 (p. 122). Quintessential examples of such signs of authenticity are the seals that were attached to medieval charters, where they served as ‘visible and tangible objects symbolizing the wishes of the donor’, in the words of Michael T. Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record: England 1066–1307*, 2nd edn (Oxford, 1993), p. 259.

aware that words that unambiguously denote 'husband' or 'wife' are not found in the poem, read the narrative as a romance and prefer the title *The Lover's Message* or *A Lover's Message*.²⁹ There is something to be said in favour of that latter approach, which reads nothing into the poem and is in keeping with the mood of eager but somewhat nervous anticipation with which the man approaches a woman whose heart may have turned in some other direction during his absence. The point is a moot one, however, for readers are left free to imagine the relationship in whatever exact way they wish. Moreover, the distinction between engagement and marriage is likely to have meant less to most Anglo-Saxons than it may mean today, when an engagement normally represents a personal agreement rather than a binding contract. The main point that the speaker stresses is that the two protagonists were once united in a mutually pledged love. Before the man's forced exile from his homeland, they were able to enjoy acts of love and affection (*frēondscype fremman* 19a, a phrase that delicately implies that their love encompassed sexual relations). The man on his part, the woman is assured, has never forgotten his vows and intends to live up to them, despite the vicissitudes of fortune and the passage of time.

The emphatic word *Nū* 'now' with which the monologue begins thus establishes the whole of the interview as taking place in an imagined present time that the speaker repeatedly contrasts to that former time (*on ārdagum*, 16a, 53a) when the two protagonists enjoyed one another's presence and swore their mutual faith. Corresponding to this temporal distinction is a geographical one between this land *hēr* 'here' (8b) where the interview is located and a country *pār* 'there' where the exiled man now resides. This new land, though never more clearly identified, is located over the high seas (*ofer merelāde* 'over the sea-path', 28a) in a southerly direction (*sūð heonan* 'south from here', 27b). These are the two resting places of the poet's geographical imagination. The speaker bridges the two realms through his active attempt to revive the past through memory. As for the identity of that speaker, let us again see what can be discerned from the text, relying just on those words that remain legible.

To begin with, the speaker's identity is half revealed and half hidden through the punning word *trēocyn* 'type of tree' in line 2. That compound noun introduces a play on the words 'tree' (the grammatically neuter noun *trēow*) and 'truth' (the grammatically feminine noun *trēow*) that is crucial to the speaker's

²⁹ Stopford A. Brooke, *The History of Early English Literature* (New York, 1925), p. 358; Peter Clemoes, *Interactions of Thought and Language in Old English Poetry* (Cambridge, 1995), p. 177.

identity. Although the hole that mars folio 123 isolates scribal *trēocyn* from whatever letters once preceded it, the literal reference of that noun is to wood. Given the number of Exeter Book riddles that feature a wooden object that speaks, a not-too-ingenuous reader might suspect that the speaker's material substance is wood and that therefore the next phrase, *ic tūdre āwēox* (2b), can be construed in the specific sense 'I grew up from a seed or sapling' even though the general meaning of the noun *tūdor* is 'child' (in a human context), 'offspring' (in a general sense), or 'progeny, seed' (used of animals, plants, or humans).³⁰ Neither the defective verse 2a nor the enigmatic verse 2b can as yet be firmly interpreted, of course; the language here is apparently meant to kindle the reader's imagination rather than to explain any features of the poem so clearly as to spoil the game. A new dimension is introduced to that contest of wits ten lines later, when the noun *trēow* is used in a different sense. Here the speaker affirms, addressing the woman, 'I dare promise that you will find there (that is, on the part of the man) strictly honourable truth (*tīrfæste trēowe*)'. Here, with its feminine accusative inflection, that last word is easily recognized as the abstract noun 'truth'. Still later, in line 52, the noun *winetrēowe*, which bears a feminine inflection and is set in grammatical apposition with the noun *wære* 'pledge' or 'vow',³¹ clearly also means 'truth', or perhaps more exactly 'the truth that is expected of a *wine*, a loyal lord or husband'. An artful contrast is thereby developed between two homophones denoting the speaker's material substance and the male protagonist's spiritual character. The speaker is made of wood (*trēow*) and his master embodies fidelity (*trēow*), or so we might well conclude at this point.

What more can be said about the speaker? First of all, the man who is his master has apparently often given him the task of traversing the sea to visit foreign regions 'in the [word missing] of a ship', 6a. Although the loss of a word here is unfortunate, editors and readers infer with little controversy that what

³⁰ Bosworth and Toller, s.v. *tūdor*. Riddles whose apparent solutions fall into the category of 'the wooden object that speaks' are K-D numbers 4 (bucket), 21 (plow), 23 (bow), 30 (*trēow*), 73 (*æsc*), 74 (*āc ond bāt*), and 92 (*bōc*), to cite examples from the list of solutions offered at pp. 141–48 above.

³¹ Although Bragg, 'Runes and Readers', p. 34, takes *wære* to be the preterite subjunctive of the verb 'to be' and translates *þæt hē þā wære* as 'that he was there', a translation along those lines can be ruled out. The word *wære* is naturally to be construed here as the noun 'vow, oath', given the speaker's earlier emphasis on *wordbēotunga* 'vows spoken in words', 15b, as well as his closing allusion to frequently reiterated pledges. In addition, if *þā* is taken to be an adverb rather than the feminine accusative singular form of the definite article, then it ought to mean 'then' and not 'there'.

once was written here is the formulaic alliterative phrase *on bātes bosme* 'in the hold of a ship'. Furthermore, the speaker declares that he has travelled *on cēolþele*, 9a. Although that OE compound word is unattested elsewhere and so its meaning can only be inferred from the present context, its constituent parts *cēol* and *þel* present little semantic difficulty. The *cēol* is the ship. In Old Icelandic, the cognate word *kjóll* denotes 'keel' and, by extension, 'barge' or 'ship', and a speaker who was conversant in both languages would have been aware of that fact, but in OE, *cēol* denotes 'ship'.³² As for *þel*, Bosworth and Toller identify that word as a neuter noun meaning 'a thin piece of wood or metal, a plank, plate'. The Old Icelandic cognate *þili* means 'a plank', and the existence of other OE compound nouns that contain the same simplex suggests that 'wooden plank' is the primary meaning of *þel*.³³ Moreover, it appears that scarcely being 'thin', a *þel* is often a substantial piece of lumber. So apparently the speaker, who appears to be of *trēocyn* 'made of wood' though we cannot be absolutely sure of that conclusion as yet, has often travelled across the seas at his master's bidding, lodged in the ship's hold. There he or it has been resting on a plank or, perhaps, has been secured to a plank-like timber as a part of the ship's architecture. The phrase *on cēolþele*, with the noun in the dative singular case, might support either interpretation, thus leaving open the possibility that the speaker is a human messenger (though why should he be in the hold?), a wooden object of some kind (whether physically secured to the ship or not), or a functional part of the ship itself. Some additional information soon sharpens this picture and will help to clarify what is meant by the phrase *on cēolþele*.

Beginning with the emphatic interjection *Hwæt* in 13a, the speaker exhorts the woman to follow the bidding of her former lover, who, he says, *þisne bēam agrōf* 'carved this piece of wood' (13b). While this reference to the woodcutter's or carpenter's arts is a tantalizing one, it is not impenetrable. A prominent display of runes or rune-like signs is soon to be made, and runes, as is well known, were routinely carved on wood. Is the object in question then a rune-inscribed piece of wood, like the *rúnakefli* 'rune-sticks' that were in circulation in Viking Age and post-Viking Age Scandinavia? R. I. Page has advocated such a view, taking this passage from *The Husband's Message* as the unique surviving evidence for English use of rune-sticks. If one accepts this conclusion (as a majority of readers

³² In an essay published in the same year that the original version of this chapter appeared in print, Dennis Cronan, 'Poetic Meanings in the Old English Poetic Vocabulary', *ES*, 84 (2003), 397–425, takes *cēol* 'ship' as his leading example of OE words that have been attributed false meanings by either lexicographers or critics, or both (at p. 397).

³³ For example, *benc-þel* 'bench plank'; *þel-brycg* 'bridge made of a plank or planks'.

have done), then the rune-stick, personified as a messenger, is attributed human voice through the rhetorical device of prosopopoeia. In this aspect, the poem would thus resemble such other poems as *The Dream of the Rood* and certain of the Exeter Book riddles — Riddle 60, for example, the ‘Speaking Reed’ riddle that directly precedes *The Husband’s Message* on fols 122^v and 123^r of the Exeter Book — as well as certain material objects from this period that ‘speak’ in the first-person singular voice, such as the Alfred Jewel.³⁴ This conclusion would at once solve the mystery of the speaker’s identity in a manner that is preferable to an alternative suggestion that has sometimes been made, namely that the speaker is a human messenger who is carrying a rune-stick to which he makes reference.

Naturally, advocates of the ‘human messenger’ approach have called attention to problems with the ‘speaking rune-stick’ approach. As Roy Leslie has asked, for example, if the speaker is a personified rune-stick, then why has that stick been sent out so often on different missions over the high seas?³⁵ One would think that such a confession on the stick’s part might not build up confidence in his master’s fidelity. Recently the force of that objection has been blunted somewhat by Janet Schrunck Ericksen, who has called attention to some material evidence of rune-stick reuse, particularly from later medieval Bergen.³⁶

It is not my purpose, however, to favour either of these views against the other, even though they have sometimes been presented in the critical literature as the only options,³⁷ for both run counter to good philology. The recalcitrant object here is the word *bēam*. Even in the context of a riddle-like poem, *bēam* ought to denote an object far more massive than what Page, succumbing perhaps for once to the libertarian spirit that some runologists regard as an inalienable tool of their trade, calls ‘this slip of wood’, thus translating *þisne bēam*.³⁸ The

³⁴ Leslie Webster, ‘Alfred Jewel’, in *Blackwell Encyclopaedia*, pp. 28–29.

³⁵ Leslie, *Three Old English Elegies*, pp. 13–14.

³⁶ Janet Schrunck Ericksen, ‘Runesticks and Reading *The Husband’s Message*’, *NM*, 99 (1998), 31–35. Ericksen also points to evidence indicating that rune-sticks were sometimes used to convey messages relating to courtship and marriage — a conclusion that comes as no surprise since the Bergen rune-sticks are largely records of business transactions. As for marriage, whatever else it was at this time it was an economic exchange.

³⁷ For example, when Klinck writes that ‘it is impossible to be sure whether the messenger, also the poem’s narrator, [. . .] is a human emissary or the personified rune-stave’ (p. 57), she apparently assumes that no other interpretation is possible.

³⁸ Page, p. 101. Bragg, ‘Runes and Readers’, rightly points out that on the contrary, the word *bēam* ‘usually denoted something the size of a telephone pole’, whereas rune-sticks ‘resemble the shims we use to level our book cases’ (p. 41).

Dictionary of Old English defines *bēam* first of all as 'tree', such as the lofty tree in which the phoenix perches in the Exeter Book poem known as *The Phoenix*.³⁹ Sense 2 given for *bēam* is 'a timber, beam, joist', such as the beam on which St Dunstan stood unscathed, preserved doubtless by divine grace, in the year 978 when everyone else was cast down who had been standing on the upper floor of a building that collapsed.⁴⁰ Sense 3, 'an object, or part of an object, made out of wood' might at first seem promising to proponents of the 'rune-stick' approach. In fact, however, what such objects turn out to be are rather massive things. In the *Æcerbot* charm, *bēam* denotes the body of a plough,⁴¹ or what elsewhere in the Old English records is called a *sulh-bēam* 'plough-beam'. In Riddle 55, as is argued above, the noun *bēam* refers to a frame or rack from which byrnies were hung (hence the 'gallows' metaphor of that riddle).⁴² As for the *bēam* of Riddle 72, it is rather obviously the yoke under which an ox or a team of oxen must labour. With some frequency, as well (this is the *DOE*'s sense 4), *bēam* is used to denote the gallows, or rood, on which Christ was hung. Finally but not helpfully in the context of *The Husband's Message*, *bēam* can denote a beam or shaft of light, such as the light streaming from a comet, and several times it refers to the pillar or cloud of fire that marks the exodus of the Jews in the Book of Exodus — something clearly visible from afar. Rather often, *bēam* is accompanied by an adjective that confirms the notion of considerable size or mass. In the Paris Psalter, for example, we hear of *micle bēamas* 'big trees', and in the Old English version of Boethius of a *grēat bēam* 'great big tree' in the woods. Surely, we may conclude, the *bēam* into which rune-like characters are imagined to be inscribed in *The Husband's Message* must denote something larger than a rune-stick.⁴³

³⁹ 'Ðær he heanne beam on holtwuda / wunað ond weardað' (There he inhabits and guards a tall tree in the forest): *The Phoenix* 171–72a; Muir, 1, 169.

⁴⁰ 'Her on þissum gear ealle þa yldestan Angelcynnes witan gefeollan æt Calne of anre upfloran, butan se halga Dunstan arcebiscop ana ætstod uppon anum beame' (In this year all the most senior advisors of England fell down from an upper floor at Calne except for the holy archbishop Dunstan [who] alone stood up on a beam): *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, vol. VII: *MS E*, ed. by Susan Irvine (Cambridge, 2004), p. 59 (*sub anno* 978).

⁴¹ 'For Unfruitful Land', line 48; Dobbie, p. 117.

⁴² I present that argument in chapter 2, 'Exeter Book Riddle 55: Some Gallows Humour' (pp. 61–84 above).

⁴³ The same suggestion is made by Robert E. Kaske, 'A Poem of the Cross in the Exeter Book: Riddle 60 and *The Husband's Message*', *Traditio*, 23 (1967), 41–71. Kaske takes the item in question to be a Rood, however, and he imagines that the whole poem, which he reads allegorically, is spoken by the personified cross. It is not clear from his discussion whether or

In the absence of strong reasons to favour either one of the accepted answers to the question of the speaker's identity, then, I will propose a different solution. The speaker is neither a living person nor a personified rune-stick. The speaker is *the wooden ship itself*; or, to be precise, it is one prominent part of that vessel: it is *the ship's personified mast*.⁴⁴

The great upright mast-tree of an Anglo-Saxon or Viking Age ship is aptly described as a *bēam*. It was once a living tree, as we might have suspected from the word *trēocyn* in 2a. As an inseparable part of the ship, the mast would naturally have been travelling far and wide at its master's behest, either because the lord himself had undertaken a number of voyages or because he had often sent the ship out on his affairs. After all, the lord is now a rich man; his voyages must have prospered. The speaker naturally grew up as a *tūdor*, a word that in this context would specifically denote a 'seed, shoot, or sapling'. The speaker has naturally been lodged in the ship's *bōsm* or hold because that is where the base of a mast is located, joined to the keel. The speaker is said to be located *on cēolpele* 'on the (or a) ship's plank' for reasons having to do with the architecture of sailing ships.

As is now well known, the shape of the main longitudinal timber of the ship underwent a significant change in northern Europe during the period from the late Iron Age to the first Viking Age. The earlier boats of that period, such as the fifth-century Nydam boat, did not carry sail, and their main longitudinal timber was a relatively flat horizontally oriented plank. This is what Evans and Bruce-Mitford refer to as the 'keel plank' when writing of the Sutton Hoo ship. By the Viking Age, however, ocean-going ships such as the ninth-century Gokstad ship carried masts and sails, and their keels were made of a long heavy timber that extended vertically fairly deep into the water. By that time, as well, northern shipwrights had developed an elaborate system of ribs and beams that helped secure the mast to the flat upper surface of the keel plank (the 'hog').⁴⁵ To return

not he conceives of the runes as being physically cut into the Rood; instead, he takes the phrase *sē pīne bēam agrof* as referring perhaps to the nails of the cross or perhaps to the sign 'INRI' that in medieval iconography often surmounts the cross.

⁴⁴ I wish to make clear that credit for this solution, should it be accepted, belongs to a specialist in Indo-European languages at the University of California, Berkeley, Professor Gary Holland, who mentioned it one night during a session of an Old English reading group. Holland did not make an argument about the runes; while reading the poem, he simply remarked approvingly upon the cleverness of the runes being inscribed on the mast. I doubt that he was aware that he had just picked out a thorn that had caused sleepless nights for Anglo-Saxonists ever since Thorpe published the editio princeps of the Exeter Book in 1842.

⁴⁵ Angela Care Evans and Rupert Bruce-Mitford, 'The Ship', in *The Sutton Hoo Ship Burial*, ed. by Bruce-Mitford, 3 vols (London, 1975–83) 1, 345–435, esp. pp. 375–82 and figures

to the noun *pel* 'plank', if that word was used to refer to the keel plank of early Anglo-Saxon ships, then it would have undergone a semantic shift as the keel itself became heavier and deeper and became more of a beam than a plank. While the compound noun *cēol-pel* remains a unique word that is general enough in its apparent significance ('ship's plank') to refer to any of a number of timbers that held the ship together and made it seaworthy, there exists at least a strong possibility that what it refers to in *The Husband's Message*, in somewhat coded fashion, is the keel or keel plank. Though OE *cēol* does not mean 'keel', its Icelandic cognate *kjóll* does (as has been noted above), and so a bilingual or bidialectal pun may even be in play here. Leaving that suggestion aside, the phrase *on cēolpele* most likely refers to the position of the speaker, the personified mast-tree, 'on the keel or keel plank', for the keel was the main timber to which the mast was secured. As the author of the Cotton Gnomes declares with his usual confidence, 'Mæst sceal on ceole, / seglgyrd seomian' (The place of a mast is on the ship, swaying as a sail-yard).⁴⁶

Importantly, as we learn in line 13 and as is implied in 50–51, the mast or *bēam* of the imagined ship has been inscribed with a message. It is like a tree-trunk into which someone has carved his initials or, in this instance, a set of enigmatic letters. For on the mast is carved the sequence of special characters that the speaker now exhibits to the woman. The voice that issues from the ship itself calls attention to the runes as material signs while at the same time, apparently, sounding out either their names or their phonetic values.⁴⁷ Like a

291 and 292. For an overview of the evolution of the architecture of ships during this period, see A. E. Christensen, 'Scandinavian Ships from Earliest Times to the Vikings', in *A History of Seafaring, Based on Underwater Archaeology*, ed. by George F. Bass (London, 1972), pp. 159–80. A concise review of the architecture of medieval Scandinavian ships is given by Alan Binns in *Medieval Scandinavia*, pp. 578–80.

⁴⁶ Dobbie, p. 56 (lines 24b–25a). Although I do not wish to argue that the word *cēol* in this quotation means 'keel' rather than 'ship', that possibility should not be ruled out, seeing that there are parallels to this extension of meaning not only in the later history of the English word *cēol*, which by the late Middle Ages becomes our 'keel', but also in German and Dutch, where since the sixteenth century the cognate noun *kiel* has lost its original sense 'ship' and has acquired the sense 'keel', perhaps under Scandinavian influence. See the *OED*, s.v. *keel*, sb.1 and sb.2.

⁴⁷ We are free to imagine that this is the very same mast and ship which formerly bore the man into exile. To follow this line of thought, we are also free to imagine that the woman could recognize the runes because she has seen them before. Their presence on the mast would serve as evidence that the ship and, hence, the speaker's assurances are genuine. But there is no need to pursue that speculation. It is enough that the woman, like any reader of the poem, is

secular analogue to the Ruthwell Cross or the Bewcastle Cross,⁴⁸ the mast bears witness through its runic epigraphy to the truth of the story that it tells. The woman's ship has literally come in after what appears to have been a long period of waiting. Like a courteous escort, the speaking *bēam* urges her to come aboard and rejoin his *frēa* 'lord, master' (10b), who is at the same time the woman's own loving *hlāford* 'lord, husband'.⁴⁹ The ship's *trēow* — the towering mast-tree, with its carvings — is a visible sign of the unchanging *trēow* of the man himself. In this manner, and in this manner alone, I believe, is the trick of the runes in *The Husband's Message* to be solved.

The Runes Themselves and their Function

There remains another puzzle that is yet unsolved, of course. What do the runic or rune-like letters that are imagined to be carved on the mast stand for, and what message are they meant to convey?

That mystery deepens when one tries to read the passage out loud, especially if one is consulting the manuscript text rather than a modern printed edition. How does one give voice to the special characters? Do the signs stand for rune-names, as most modern scholars have supposed, partly on metrical grounds?⁵⁰ If

being asked to use her wits to understand the significance of the runes within the context of the speaker's exhortation.

⁴⁸ See *Blackwell Encyclopaedia*, s.v. 'Ruthwell Cross' and 'Bewcastle', respectively.

⁴⁹ To be precise, neither *frēa* nor *hlāford* (a noun that yet more readily can denote 'husband'; see Toller, s.v. *hlāford*, sense II.2.b: 'the master of a wife, a wife's lord and master, the husband') is used of the man in his role as husband. Instead, when spoken of in relation to the woman, he is called simply *hē* 'he' or the *monn* 'man' (25b), varied by the weak nominal form *monna* (28b). When spoken of in relation to his role as the speaker's master, he is referred to by the more honorific titles *mondryhten mīn* (line 7), *sē þēoden* (29a), and *mīn wine* (39b). It may be that out of deference to the woman, who is of high rank (conceivably higher than the man's), the speaker avoids referring to the man by epithets that would suggest that he is anything other than her beloved petitioner, even though she is made to know that he is now someone of wealth and power. This distinction can be taken as additional evidence of the speaker's mastery of the rhetoric of persuasion.

⁵⁰ The assumption underlying this approach (whether or not it is made explicit) is that metrical regularity is to be maintained throughout this passage. Although a felicitous solution to the passage indeed ought to be metrically 'correct' (as my own solution is, as we shall see), I would argue against taking metrical regularity for granted as a heuristic principle. A reading that is unmetrical ought to remain within the range of possibilities. I favour this position on

so, then following many scholars since Kock, we may wish to read the lines in a manner such as the following:

Gecyre ic ætsomne *sigel rad* geador,
 ear, wynn, ond mann aþe benemnan.⁵¹

(I group together *sun* and *road*, *earth*, *joy* and *man*, to be named with an oath.)

Readers who have adopted this hermeneutic strategy have tended to assume that the purpose of this grouping or binding of the runes is to increase the solemnity and, perhaps, the magical power of the couple's oath by calling on sky and earth to witness it. Construing the five runes in sequence, readers have found in them first of all a *sky*: literally a *sigel-rād*, or 'jewel's bridle-path', the jewel in question being the sun, which 'rides' across the sky like a horse, in a kenning of which any skald would have approved. They have also found *earthly joy* in the **EA**-rune (taken to denote *ēar* 'earth') taken in conjunction with the next special character (denoting *wynn* 'joy').⁵² As for the final rune, if it is taken to represent an **M** and not a **D** then it obviously yields the noun *mann* 'man', a term that is elsewhere used of the male protagonist of the poem considered as the woman's lover or husband (25b). Thus some readers see evidence here of a solemn oath sworn in ancient style with heaven, earth, and the man himself invoked as witnesses. A quasi-pagan element is introduced that is in keeping with the magical qualities popularly associated with runes.

There is a problem with this approach, however. The phonetic value of the runes may have been common knowledge, but the same is not necessarily true of their names. While the names of most of the older runes that are derived from the Old Germanic futhark undergo only minor variation and must have been widely known, the newer runes that were devised for speech-sounds resulting from sound changes specific to Old English did not necessarily have stable names. One cannot turn to what would seem to be the most authoritative source

the grounds that the writers of Old English verse (whether authors or scribes) seem often to have been less concerned about maintaining 'textbook' rules of metrics than about maintaining the basic grammar and sense of a passage (though scribes sometimes misconstrue either or both of these things, as well). This position is one that I urge as a general rule with regard to the editing of Old English texts, and it is one that I take up with specific regard to *Beowulf* in 'Editing *Beowulf*: What Can Study of the Ballads Tell Us?', *Oral Tradition*, 9 (1994), 440–67.

⁵¹ Ernst A. Kock, 'Interpretations and Emendations of Early English Texts, VIII', *Anglia*, 45 (1921), 105–31 (pp. 122–23). Kock opts for *gecyre* over *gehýre*.

⁵² If one prefers to read the **EA**-rune as denoting *ēar* in the sense 'the ocean', then it is alternatively *the joy of the open sea* that one would see here. See note 60 below.

for information about the Old English futhorc, namely the work known as *The Rune Poem*, for a definitive list of rune-names. The lost manuscript in which the unique copy of that poem was once written, London, British Library, Cotton MSS, Otho B X, was almost completely destroyed by fire in 1731. It is unlikely to have included more than a list of the runic characters with each character followed by a short verse paragraph beginning with the word that the rune was meant to signify. The names of the runes (*fēoh*, *ūr*, *þorn*, and so on) appear to have been added in the first printed edition of that poem as the result of a collation of several manuscripts (see Fig. 8).⁵³ Although most of these names can arouse no controversy, several of them must be regarded as hypothetical and, again, ad hoc rather than authoritative. As has been mentioned, for example, there is no good evidence from the Anglo-Saxon period as to what the accepted name (as opposed to the phonetic value) of the **EA**-rune was. Any guess about that name has to be chiefly the result of inference from the short verse paragraph in *The Rune Poem*, and the meaning that is called for there may be specific to that poem.⁵⁴ As for the **S**-rune, it too presents a special problem. As Peter Nicholson has shown, the only name that works for it in the context of both *The Rune Poem* and *The Husband's Message* is *segl* 'sail' (and thus by synecdoche 'ship') rather than *sigel* 'jewel' (and thus metaphorically 'sun').⁵⁵ I do not see how Nicholson's arguments can be refuted, whatever the **S**-rune may have been taken to mean elsewhere. If one accepts this view, then the neo-pagan 'sky and earth' approach to the translation of the lines from *The Husband's Message* must be forsaken, for neither 'sky' nor 'earth' is reliably present.

There appears to be some justification, then, for a different approach to the runic passage from *The Husband's Message*. A person wanting to read that passage

⁵³ Halsall, pp. 25–26, in an opinion going back to G. Hempl, 'Hickes's Additions to the Runic Poem', *MPh*, 1 (1903), 135–41.

⁵⁴ Although the claim is sometimes made that the name of that rune is *ēar* 'earth' and hence by extension 'grave' (a sense that fits this context well), *ēar* is unattested except as a runic siglum. No OE free-standing noun *ēar* meaning 'earth' is attested. For additional discussion, see chapter 7 below, pp. 274–76, including note 52.

⁵⁵ Peter Nicholson, 'The Old English Rune for S', *JEGP*, 81 (1982), 313–19. Nicholson's suggestion goes back to John M. Kemble, 'On Anglo-Saxon Runes', *Archaeologia*, 28 (1840), 327–72, repr. with additional notes and translation by Bill Griffiths, *Anglo-Saxon Runes* (Pinner, Middlesex, 1991), pp. 33, 36, and 39, although Kemble treats the 'sail' name as a 'gross blunder' rather than a felicitous choice. Kemble's and Nicholson's interpretation of this rune-name is accepted by Bill Griffiths, *Aspects of Anglo-Saxon Magic*, 2nd edn (Hockwold-cum-Wilton, Norfolk, 2003), p. 221.

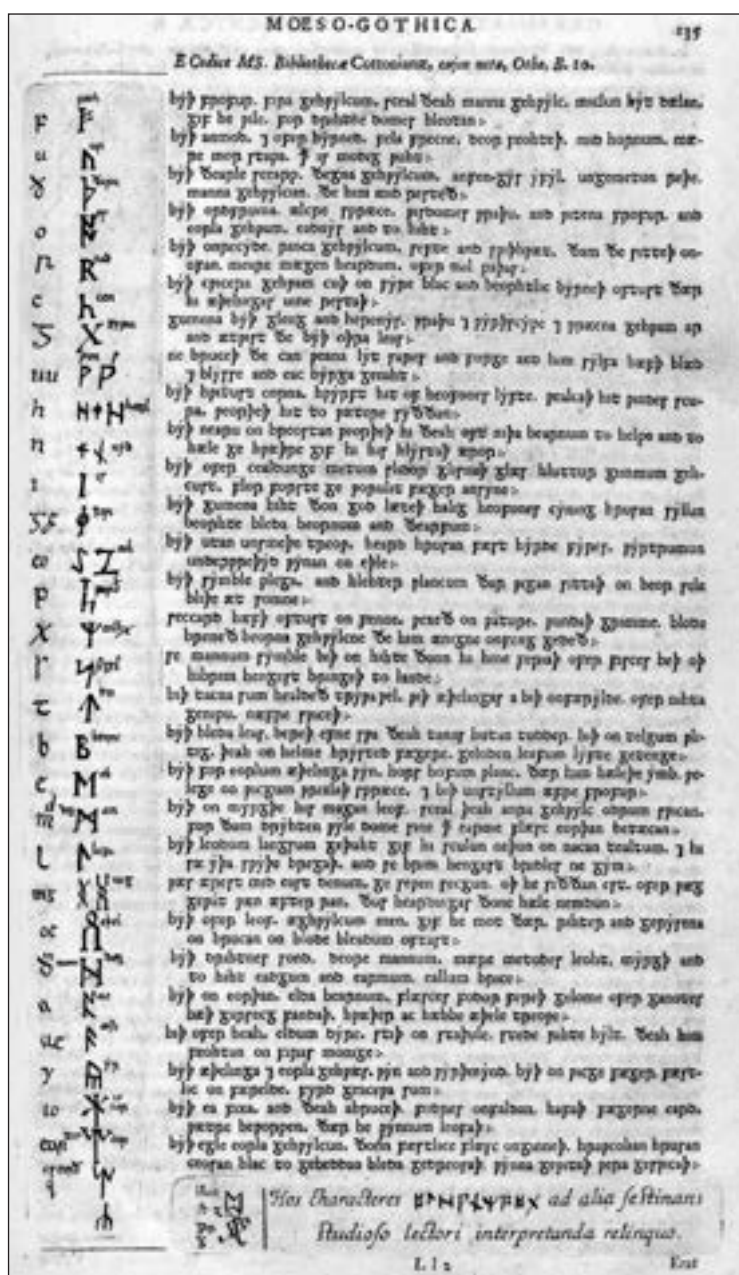


Figure 8. Facsimile of the first printed edition of *The Rune Poem*. George Hickes, *Linguarum Veterum Septentrionalium Thesaurus* (Oxford, 1703), p. 135. Cambridge University Library.

out loud would have four alternatives.⁵⁶ (1) One can read the runes as initials, as if they were equivalent to roman letters, as Muir prints them in his edition. (2) One can read them as phonemes, attributing to them their conventional sound value. (3) One can do one's best to name them as runes, basing one's guesses as to what those names are on what one knows from other sources. Or, whether in desperation or so as to keep one's options open, (4) one can read the main text of the passage out loud in the usual manner but can refrain from trying to pronounce the five special characters. These are the main choices but not the only ones, for individual readers are free to combine any of the possible methods of reading in a pastiche of letters, phonemes, provisional rune-names, vocables, and silent reading. The point to keep in mind as we read this folio of the Exeter Book through to its end, trying to read it aloud (as we rightly do with Old English verse), is that our progress to the bottom of the page is physically impeded if not wholly blocked. The substance of the poem may be words that want to be spoken — *Nū ic* [. . .] *pē secgan wille* 'Now I want to say to you', the poem begins — but at this point, speech sounds falter. Only the visible signs of speech carry on from left to right. After this temporary impasse, the speaker's monologue resumes, continuing fluently until the last words *git* [. . .] *oft gesprāconn* 'the two of you often said'. This final phrase echoes line 1 thematically in its renewed emphasis on the importance of the act of speech itself, here with reference to a verbal pact (*wāre*, 52a) of the kind that binds people of honest intentions together in a common will or fate (*winetrēowe*, 52b).

What do the special characters mean, then?

The importance of that question can perhaps be overestimated. As Peter Orton has maintained, the symbols are unlikely to signify anything more than is already said in the surrounding lines.⁵⁷ To put his good point another way, the whole monologue serves as an extended gloss on the five letters, filling out and clarifying their message so that there can be no possible mistake on the part of

⁵⁶ Nor are these the only choices. In her article 'The Runic Riddles of the Exeter Book: Language Games and Anglo-Saxon Scholarship', *Nottingham Medieval Studies*, 39 (1995), 26–36, Roberta J. Dewa shows that taken together, the Exeter Book runes signify many things, including their equivalents in roman letters. She observes that they were subject to several different cryptographic techniques including the substitution of vowels by the immediately following consonants. As a result, their reading involves 'various forms of creative linguistic dislocation' and requires 'a variety of problem-solving approaches from the reader' (p. 36).

⁵⁷ Peter Orton, 'The Speaker in *The Husband's Message*', *Leeds Studies in English*, n.s., 12 (1981), 43–56. Orton argues that 'the speech may be, not so much an expansion of the runic message, but more an expression of what it was meant to imply to the recipient' (p. 47).

the reader or the implied hearer. There is no real code to crack here; there are no deep mysteries hidden in the runes. Instead, we should bring normal powers of analysis to bear on each symbol and on their combination, interpreting them within the context of the monologue as a whole while at the same time remaining alert to the precise syntactical pointers that the author gives us.

In any event, **·H·R·** *geador* must denote a compound word whose first simplex begins with *s* (to make an alliterative chime with the *s* of *ætsumne* in the preceding verse) and whose second simplex begins with *r*. Given that the speaker dwells so insistently on crossing the high seas,⁵⁸ it would not be far-fetched to surmise that this word has to do with the sea or seafaring. Indeed, as Nicholson has argued, the first encoded word of the message is of course not **sigel-rād*, an otherwise unattested kenning for 'sky' (as many readers have thought it to be), but rather *segl-rād* 'bridle path of the sail' — that is, of a ship, considered metaphorically in the guise of a sea-stallion. As a transparent kenning for the open sea, *segl-rād* is attested elsewhere in the Old English poetic records, namely in verse 1429b of *Beowulf* in the context of the hero's sea-voyage home to the land of the Geatas.⁵⁹ The compound noun **sigel-rād* 'sun' can thus be consigned to whatever place ghost-words go to retire. All the same, any readers who wish to cling by their fingertips to whatever purchase is offered by the phantom **sigel-rād* will not lose the speaker's point entirely, for the sun, that celestial jewel (*sigel*), is always an auspicious sign, while the path of the sun when observed from any point in the northern hemisphere will naturally point the woman towards the south, where the man is said to reside. Again, if *segl-rād* is accepted as the correct solution here but one wonders if another compound word with the same initial letters might also make a good choice, then the solution **sūð-rād* 'the road to the south' might also be entertained. Since this word, though transparent in meaning, is not attested in the Old English records, and since moreover it lacks the poetic qualities that make the kenning *segl-rād* an attractive choice, it too can be regarded as no more than a possible overtone, like a sympathetic string that vibrates to a leading tone.

As for the **EA**-rune, clearly one can do better than opting for a nonce-word **ēar* meaning 'earth' here, or alternatively (in a reading that is only slightly to be

⁵⁸ Note *sealte strēamas* 'salt streams' (4a), *hēah hafu* 'high seas' (8a), *lagu* 'sea' (21b), *mere* 'sea' (26a), *māwes ēpel* 'the seagull's homeland' (26b), *ofer merelāde* 'over the sea-path' (28a), *yða gelagu* 'expanse of waves' (42a), *flotweg* 'ocean path' (43a), and *merestrēamas* 'sea currents' (44a).

⁵⁹ Kennings of a similar type are attested in *Beowulf* (as well as elsewhere), e.g. *hron-rād* 'bridle-path of the whale, ocean' (10a) and *swan-rād* 'bridle-path of the swan, ocean' (200a).

preferred) for the rare word *ēar* meaning ‘sea’.⁶⁰ The trick here is to listen for the sound of the visual sign itself. What OE word or words beginning with *ea* (and thus providing vowel alliteration with *āþe* in the next verse) comes naturally to mind? First and most obviously, there is the word *ēa* itself. This is a common OE noun whose primary meaning is ‘river’ or ‘large body of running water’.⁶¹ If adopted here, that meaning would reinforce the image of the ‘sail’s bridle path’ or ‘sea’ that is introduced in the previous verse, even though the switch from the open sea to a river or at best a river mouth might require some explanation. But there is another possibility and a better one. As a monosyllabic word, *ēa* ‘river’ would not make for good metre in verse 51a. What one wants, ideally, is a disyllabic word beginning with this same initial sound. Although the demands of metre should not dictate our interpretation, neither should they be ignored. Seeing that the speaker has referred in such glowing terms to his lord’s prosperity,⁶² then one word that leaps to mind as a suitable one in this context is the adjective *ēadig* ‘happy, wealthy, blessed’. After his forced exile, the man has become *ēadig* again except with regard to one thing: he lacks the company of his former consort. Now, he assures her, she will complete his happiness if she will accept his exhortation to cross the sea in fulfilment of their former vows.

Provisionally accepting the word *ēadig* as a contextually appropriate expansion of the third rune, let us consider the fourth symbol, **ƿ**. At first its sense would seem to be unambiguous. As a letter borrowed from the futhorc into bookhand, it bears the name *wynn* ‘joy’ or ‘pleasure’, as all readers have recognized. The symbol is thus suggestive of good fortune, and its normal sense would double the force of the provisional reading *ēadig*. Still, there is something infelicitous in the redundancy of the phrase *ēadig wynn* that would result if one accepts the reading *ēadig* and gives **ƿ** its face value. Is there any other *w*-initial word that would make for an ideal fit in this context? Given that the whole poem consists of a man’s exhortation to his wife or fiancée, two such words that come to mind at

⁶⁰ Ralph W. V. Elliott, ‘The Runes in *The Husband’s Message*’, *JEGP*, 54 (1955), 1–8 (at p. 4), proposes to read *ēar* as ‘ocean, sea, wave’, as in Riddle 3, verse 22a, and as in compounds such as *ēar-geblond* and *ēar-grund*. Williamson adopts such a reading, p. 316 (n.), taking the **EA** plus **W** rune-pair to denote *ēar-wynn* ‘sea-joy’.

⁶¹ The *DOE*, s.v. *ēa*.

⁶² Note particularly ‘he genoh hafað / fedan gold[es]’ (he has plenty of ornamental gold, 35b–36a) and ‘nis him wilna gad — / ne meara ne maðma ne meododreama, / ænges ofer eorþan eorlgestreona’ (he has no lack of material wealth, whether horses or treasures or the pleasures of mead, [no lack] of any of the fine possessions to be had on earth, 45b–47).

once are the nouns *wer* 'man, husband' and *wif* 'woman, wife'. Either noun would suit the context well, but for the reason that is about to be discussed, I suggest that the most felicitous expansion of the combination 'Ŧ·P·' is the nominal phrase *ēadig wif* 'a happy woman (or wife)'.

The last of the symbols, M, is in a way the easiest to interpret. It presents no problem as long as one accepts the reading M and rejects the reading D as either an error or, as I think more likely, yet another red herring thrown across the path. After all, there is more than one way to mislead a reader, and a deliberately misdrawn rune is one of them.⁶³ Accepting M as the better reading, then, we have a *mann* 'man' at the end of the poem. If one wishes to read the three symbols in line 51 in a continuous verbal phrase, observing the syntax that the poet provides through inclusion of the tyronian *nota*, then a felicitous reading for the whole phrase would be *ēadig wifond mann*, or, in modern English idiom, 'a happy man and wife'.

There is yet another plausible way of interpreting those three characters as a group, though it yields no very different results. That is to take the W and M symbols as denoting the two parts of the compound noun *wif-mann*, thus yielding the phrase *ēadig wifmann* 'happy woman (or wife)'. This choice improves upon the metre of the verse. It does so at some cost, however, for one must ignore the syntactical connection that is provided by the tyronian *nota*. Although I therefore favour the reading *wifond mann* over *wifmann* here, the choice is not a crucial one. The important point is that all these constructions are auspicious. The runic letters of *The Husband's Message* can be construed in a number of ways, but it is very hard to construe them wrong; that is, in a manner that is at odds with the essential tenor of the monologue.

The gist of the message that is conveyed by the special characters thus corresponds exactly to the gist of the speech as a whole. 'Take the *segl-rād*,' the speaker urges. 'If you do, there will surely be good fortune (*wynn*) in store for you, an *ēadig wifond mann*.' The conceit by which an abbreviated version of this message is to be imagined as inscribed into the *trēow*, the mast-tree, does much to

⁶³ See note 7 above. A reader who prefers to read the last symbol as the D-rune will have more difficulty interpreting the verse that has just been discussed. There is no compulsion, however, to associate that symbol with the conventional rune-name *dæg* 'day', which has no obvious connection to the content of the monologue. 'A happy [wife and] day' would be both an awkward and, I fear, an anachronistic construction here. A better fit in the context of the speech as a whole would be the d-initial word *dryhten*, which is a common synonym for *pēoden* 'prince' (29a) and thus would naturally refer to the man or husband. I do not favour this approach, however.

enhance its apparent truth value and, we can imagine, its rhetorical effectiveness. If the woman cannot, like Daniel, see the writing on the wall, she can at least read the runes carved on the mast. If she is not won over by assurances of the man's material wealth, by the prospect of good brew (note the strategic mention of *meododrēam* 'mead-joy', 46b), and by the desire to avoid the shame that might accrue to her should she leave herself open to the charge of violating her vows, she must surely be persuaded by the wit of the man's appeal.

Runes and Initialisms from Sigdrífumál to Anna Kerenin

When writing about the Exeter Book riddles, I have made the point that although no one can now speak with absolute authority as to how any of the riddles are to be solved, solutions to some of them have been proposed that are so felicitous as to have won over a consensus of modern readers.⁶⁴ It is my hope that the hermeneutic strategy I have brought to bear on *The Husband's Message*, similarly, will be thought to provide a satisfactory resolution to the problem of how to interpret this strenuously riddle-like poem.

To recapitulate that strategy, it involves four elements. Firstly is the assumption that the work is best approached as an ordinary poem that has been 'runified' rather than as a true exercise in runic script. Secondly is the crucial insight that it is the ship itself (or, to be precise, a prominent part of it, the tree-like mast) that is the personified speaker. Thirdly is the corresponding hypothesis that the rune-like letters are imagined to be carved into the mast. Fourthly is the decision to read the runes not according to an external list of their names, but rather as initial letters that are to be expanded into words that offer a felicitous fit in this context. Modern readers of the poem may have erred in assuming that what the end of the poem presents is a set of runes meant to yield one solution, perhaps steeped in magic, when what it offers instead is what language offers in general in its common use: namely, a flexible and redundant way to see that a given message is communicated without any possibility of mistake. In this instance, what the message consists of is the repeated encouragement that the woman will never go wrong if she steps aboard the ship to rejoin her former lover.

⁶⁴ In chapter 1, at pp. 26–31 above, I discuss the criteria that determine 'correctness' in literary interpretation and suggest that what is meant by a 'correct' solution to a riddle is, in essence, a 'felicitous' one.

Some readers may protest, of course, that my proposed manner of reading the special characters in *The Husband's Message* involves some cheating. I agree, though I would take that word in a somewhat different sense and would shift responsibility for it to the author of the poem or, rather, to the 'rules' of this runological game. The whole purpose of riddling, rather like that of the card game known as 'cheat',⁶⁵ is to cheat successfully (if you are the riddler) or to catch someone else at cheating by discovering his or her rhetorical trick or tricks (if you are the one trying to guess the answer). The essence of riddling is to push language beyond its customary rule-governed categories through the bold use of metaphor, paronomasia, personification, and any of a number of other rhetorical stratagems. The essence of solving the riddle is to guess what particular trick is being employed. 'What goes around and around the house but never comes in?' — 'The path'. The chief trick here is personification, the breaking down of the boundary between the animate and the inanimate. 'What is brown and sticky?' — 'A stick'. The trick here is neologism, a special kind of wordplay whereby a word is used in a manner that is unfamiliar and yet, upon reflection, will strike a reader as apt.

Some persons seem to assume that cheating is off limits in the quasi-sacral arena of runography. In the eyes of one scholar, for example, the important ninth- or tenth-century poet who 'signed' four of his compositions with the signature 'Cynewulf' would have been above playing games with the names of the runes that he used to spell out his name. 'In our view,' we are archly told, 'Cynewulf was not likely to interpret these runes in the arbitrary manner of some of his modern commentators, but would give them their correct names.'⁶⁶ In a related study, the same scholar has maintained that there 'must be consistency' in one's interpretation of a given sequence of runes, for Cynewulf would not have used 'erratic' methods of encoding his name.⁶⁷ The author of this study seems to assume that all runes had names that were a matter of common knowledge. In addition, he regards Cynewulf as an honourable man who would not deceive his readers by using anything other than those names.

⁶⁵ See the *OED*, s.v. *cheat* sb.1, sense 8: 'A game at cards, the point of which is to cheat without detection, and to detect cheating in others, failure in either attempt involving a forfeit.'

⁶⁶ Ralph W. V. Elliott, 'Cynewulf's Runes in *Juliana* and *The Fates of the Apostles*', *ES*, 34 (1953), 193–204, repr. in *Cynewulf: Basic Readings*, ed. by Robert E. Bjork (New York, 1996), pp. 293–307 (p. 299).

⁶⁷ Ralph W. V. Elliott, 'Cynewulf's Runes in *Christ II* and *Elene*', *ES*, 34 (1953), 49–57, repr. in *Cynewulf: Basic Readings*, ed. by Bjork, pp. 281–91 (p. 283).

In the next chapter I will question more systematically the assumption that all the runes had fixed names that were commonly known. As for the assumption that Cynewulf invariably used the runes ‘by the book’, it is contradicted by evidence (to be presented in the next chapter after that) that Cynewulf, although doubtless a man of honour, was also creative in his use of runes. Rather than assuming that Cynewulf was familiar with a set of conventional rune-names on which he reliably drew while composing his signatures, one might better assume that he was willing to use runes in a manner that suited his game of cheat. Cynewulf has been admired as a poet who asks for his readers’ intercessory prayers and who therefore took pains to make his runic signatures spell out his name unerringly. In the view of Ralph W. V. Elliott, who quotes with approval the words of Kenneth Sisam on this point, Cynewulf ‘endeavoured with all the skill and artistry at his command to attain his aim, “which was no less than his own salvation”’.⁶⁸ That conclusion is very likely. Conceivably, in between moments of praying and waiting for salvation, Cynewulf may also have enjoyed a measure of cryptographic fun. The same is true, I suggest, of the unknown author of *The Husband’s Message*.

In the realm of literary interpretations, of course, the quality of felicity is a subjective one. It can vary from reader to reader. A person of a sceptical disposition who has read the foregoing analysis might scoff, for example, that though the argument is tolerably convincing in and of itself, it is ad hoc and hence in the end infelicitous. Is there any evidence for Viking Age ships having runes cut into their masts? And do there exist any comparable narratives that ask for a solution along similar lines? The comparative evidence that has been cited thus far in this chapter might be found stimulating but unrelated to those two points. I shall conclude, therefore, by calling attention to two other texts that, when read in conjunction with *The Husband’s Message*, will confirm the validity of the two ideas of *the rune-adorned ship* and *the use of initialisms in courtship rituals* that stand at the heart of my analysis.

First is the poem known as *Sigrdrífumál*.⁶⁹ In this highly atmospheric poem from the *Elder Edda*, Sigurd rides south to Frankland and encounters a valkyrie, Sigrdrífa, who is lying within a wall of shields beneath a fire that flares up into

⁶⁸ Elliott, ‘Cynewulf’s Runes in *Juliana*’, p. 305, quoting Kenneth Sisam, ‘Cynewulf and his Poetry’, *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 18 (1932), 303–31 (p. 321).

⁶⁹ Joseph Harris, ‘Sigrdrífumál’, in *Medieval Scandinavia*, pp. 581–82; *Edda: Die Lieder des Codex Regius nebst verwandten Denkmälern*, ed. by Hans Kuhn, 2 vols (Heidelberg, 1962), 1, 189–97. The quotations below are from Kuhn, 1, 190–91.

the heavens. Using his sword Gram to cut off her constricting byrnie, he awakens her from a magically induced sleep. After revealing her name, she offers Sigurd a horn full of ale that, evidently, is spiced with magical spells and love runes (*fullr* [. . .] *góðra galdra oc gamanrúna*, st. 5). Sigurd asks that she teach him wisdom, seeing that she has knowledge from all the worlds (*tíðindi ór ǫllum heimom*, p. 190 line 13). Her reply takes the form of a long speech, chiefly in *ljóðaháttr* metre, that takes up most of the remaining part of the extant part of the lay. The valkyrie's knowledge of arcane things extends to victory runes, ale runes, midwifery runes, healing runes, runes that serve to enhance eloquence, and runes to sharpen the wits. More pertinently for our purposes, she also knows of runes that are meant safeguard a ship and its crew on journeys:

Brimrúnar scaltu gera, ef þú vilt borgit hafa
 á sundi seglm ǫrom;
 á stafni scal rísta oc á stíornar blaði
 oc leggja eld í ár;
 era svá brattr breki né svá blár unnir,
 þó kǫmztu heill af hafi. (st. 10)

(Sea-runes must you use if you wish to keep yourself safe on the sea in sail-steeds (ships). Carve them into the prow and rudder and burn them into the oars. However mighty the breakers, however dark the depths, you will yet come away from the sea safe and sound.)

To be sure, this passage offers no precise parallel to *The Husband's Message*, for the runes of the Old English poem are not meant to protect a ship; they are carved on the ship to safeguard a marital relationship. Furthermore, rather than being carved into the mast, the Viking runes are to be marked on the ship's prow, steering oar, and rowing oars. The underlying idea is still a similar one. Admittedly, the valkyrie's imagined ship is a literary vessel and not a material one. No actual ship of the Viking or Anglo-Saxon age with runic inscriptions has been recovered by archaeologists, nor should we expect such a find to be made. Still, *Sigrdrífumál* provides evidence that the idea of carving runes on a ship would not have been a foreign one to the northern seafaring peoples of this time.

The second comparative example takes us much farther afield, but we have a magical ship at hand, so let us take the journey. In chapter 13 of book IV of Leo Tolstoy's novel *Anna Karenin* occurs one of the most memorable love-scenes in literature. Tolstoy's alter-ego in the novel, Levin, is alone in the drawing-room of a country house with his old flame, Kitty. Although Kitty had once turned down his proposal of marriage, she now receives him kindly. We are not told if this change of heart reflects a new-found maturity on her part or is the result of

her having been dropped by her other suitors. Levin, still crazy about her after all these years, finds himself incapable of speaking his hopes in rational speech. Instead, he spells out a message in chalk on a table. Significantly for my purposes in this chapter, all that he writes is *the first letter of certain words* that form a sentence in his mind. Here is the passage in Rosemary Evans's English translation:

'Don't go,' he said, sitting down at the table. 'I've wanted to ask you a question for a long time.' He looked straight into her caressing, though frightened eyes.

'What is it?'

'Here,' he said, and wrote down the initial letters, **w, y, t, m, i, c, n, b — d, t, m, n, o, t?** These letters stood for, 'When you told me *it could not be* — did that mean never, or then?' There seemed no likelihood that she would be able to decipher this complicated sequence; but he looked at her as though his life depended on her understanding the words.

She gazed up at him seriously, then leaned her puckered forehead on her hand and began to read. Once or twice she stole a look at him, as though asking, 'Is it what I think?'

'I know what it is,' she said, flushing a little.

'What is this word?' he asked, pointing to the **n** which stood for *never*.

'That means *never*,' she said, 'but it's not true!'⁷⁰

While there is no need to report this tender scene in its entirety, it is significant that Kitty turns out to be a clever cryptologist as well as a canny psychologist. She reads Levin's initialisms correctly, it seems. She then writes some initialisms of her own in response. Since Levin is just as magically intuitive as she is when it is his turn to interpret those marks, the scene draws to a happy conclusion. In the end, words become superfluous. Levin reads his most important message directly through Kitty's eyes, and she then spells out her response to his proposal of marriage in two letters that spell *da*:

He sat down and wrote a long sentence [still using just the first letters of words]. She understood it all and, without asking if she was right, took the chalk and at once wrote the answer.

For a long time he could not make out what it was, and kept looking up into her eyes. He was dazed with happiness. He could not fill in the words she meant at all; but in her lovely eyes, suffused with happiness, he saw all he needed to know. And he wrote down three letters. But before he had finished writing she read them over his arm, and herself finished and wrote the answer, 'Yes.'⁷¹

⁷⁰ Leo Tolstoy, *Anna Karenin*, trans. by Rosemary Evans (London, 1978), pp. 422–23, with my boldface emphasis of the individual letters that Levin writes.

⁷¹ Tolstoy, *Anna Karenin*, p. 423.

The device of half-revealing, half-hiding a message by presenting only the first letter of certain words is not unique to Tolstoy's fiction. It is an age-old practice, one that is illustrated not only in Cynewulf's runic signatures but also in the pseudo-cryptography of old-fashioned novels that refer to certain supposedly historical characters as 'Mrs. R—— of D—— Lane', for example, thus lending fiction the illusion of reality. A similar technique is sometimes still used as a way of representing taboo words on the printed page. The resulting 'code' is likely to strike most readers as blatantly transparent, but that very obviousness may contribute to the humour of this type of typographical ploy, which tends to succeed when either the explicit expression of taboo words or the outright censorship of them would be equally unattractive options. Comparative evidence, such as it is, therefore suggests that the strategy of initialisms that I have identified in *The Husband's Message* is neither implausible nor unprecedented.

The Husband's Message and The Wife's Lament as *Diptych*

One last question about *The Husband's Message* is worth posing. What response are we to imagine the woman making to her interlocutor's long speech? Does she, like Tolstoy's Kitty, accept her lover's unorthodox entreaty? Are we to imagine the two northern lovers reunited in some happier and sunnier land across the sea? Or are we to imagine that she scorns her lover's request, angered at his long absence or, perhaps, now entrenched in different circumstances or involved with some other man? Although these are questions that are neither posed nor answered in the text of the poem itself, they are likely to arise in a reader's mind, and so, like the prospects of Eliza Doolittle and Henry Higgins finding marital bliss together at the end of Shaw's play *Pygmalion*, they are an irrepressible part of the poem as a phenomenological experience.

Courtship-riddling is a hazardous pastime if the riddles that are posed prove to be too hard for the beloved to guess. A courtship riddle is also likely to fall flat if the beloved has her mind on other things. The answers to courtship riddles must be intuited; there must be a meeting of hearts, not just of minds. My own fantasy — a male fantasy, I am quick to grant — is that the woman who is wooed in *The Husband's Message* has both the cultural competence and the enduring love that will allow her to read unerringly the message that is carved into the mast. As to whether she will accept the speaker's invitation or not, we cannot tell, but Kitty's example leaves room for hope. In addition, the physical presence of the runes on the mast might be imagined to give the speaker's words an aura of magical efficacy, for as we have seen, runes have always been vaguely associ-

ated with magical powers. More concretely, it has sometimes been believed that a person who desires another person's erotic attentions might, like the stray valkyrie, try to influence that person through the use of love-runes. Thus readers of *The Husband's Message* are free to conclude, if they wish, that the woman is put at least partially under the spell of the speaker through the quasi-magical efficacy of the runes. That is a pretty fiction, at any rate. Alternatively, mention of the runes (like the emphasis on secret speech, the motif of forced exile, the man's dramatic reversal of fortune, the magical ship, and the cuckoo) may simply be taken as adding to the intrigue and mystique of this Anglo-Saxon mini-romance. Certainly the physical presence of the runes, that arcane script, implies that the two lovers share secrets that no one else can or should know. That is a truth that any lover ought to grant. All in all, although the two protagonists must finally be allowed their secrets, I see no harm in imagining them reunited.

Nor is harm done if one mentally groups *The Husband's Message* not only with the riddles, but also with that curiously comparable dramatic monologue known as *The Wife's Lament*.⁷² A strong desire on the part of modern readers to link those two poems together could, again, be called part of the phenomenological experience of reading either text. Although the two poems are independent literary creations, each of which must be read in its own terms, it is worth noting that like 'a diptych of elegy and consolation', as David Howlett has called them,⁷³ they are situated only seven folios apart in the Exeter Book. The 'plot' of one poem parallels the 'plot' of the other so closely that each monologue might be read as a warped mirror image of the other. It is as if each speaker were reflecting on the very same situation from a violently different perspective. At the very least, as Pat Belanoff has mildly put it, 'the two voices encapsulate gendered differences'.⁷⁴

⁷² It is beyond my purposes to make an extended comparison of these two poems from the Exeter Book. Scholars as far back as Trautmann have thought them to represent companion pieces ('Zur Botschaft des Gemahls', pp. 222–25), but there is no consensus in favour of that view, and Klinck, pp. 58–59, argues against it. In 'The Problem of the Ending of *The Wife's Lament*' (pp. 149–207 above) I reject the view that the wife is conciliatory towards her husband and argue that she ends her speech by cursing him.

⁷³ David R. Howlett, '*The Wife's Lament* and *The Husband's Message*', *NM*, 79 (1978), 7–10 (p. 7). Howlett's list of specific phrases that occur in similar or identical form in each poem (p. 9) is suggestive, indeed, either of the common authorship of those poems or of a 'poem and response' relationship whereby one author knew the other's work and played off it.

⁷⁴ Pat Belanoff, '*Ides . . . geomrode giddum*: The Old English Female Lament', in *Medieval Women's Song: Cross-Cultural Approaches*, ed. by Anne L. Klinck and Ann Marie Rasmussen (Philadelphia, PA, 2002), pp. 29–46 (p. 38).

First two lovers are married; then the man departs; then (unknown to the man) the woman, abused by her in-laws, suffers a wretched kind of internal banishment; in the meantime (unknown to the woman), the man prospers in his new home. Finally — and this is the whole substance of *The Husband's Message* — he sends a message to her in secret, reminding her of their former vows and urging her to rejoin him. When read in this manner, *The Husband's Message* could be thought to put the lie to the woman's desperate fears of abandonment that form the main substance of *The Wife's Lament*. The man has never abandoned his wife, it now appears; he has just had to wait for the right moment to ask her to join him. That is one way to read the two poems as a pair. There is another way, however. By reverse token, the concluding part of *The Wife's Lament* could be thought to put the lie to the husband's polyannic optimism in *The Husband's Message*. Savage dramatic irony could be discerned in the man's apparent opacity. He may have prospered, but does he not conceive of the suffering she has endured? Does he have no sense of how bitter and vindictive she may have grown in his absence?⁷⁵

Neither of these two diametrically opposed responses to the two poems could be called 'correct' or 'incorrect', for in the end each poem stands alone. The woman of *The Wife's Lament* is not 'in' *The Husband's Message*, nor is the man of that latter poem 'in' the other monologue. All that we have here are two poems of similar type that are based on a similar plot. The resemblance of those two narrative ideas is so striking, however, as to defy coincidence. The reasonably close codicological juxtaposition of these two texts seems designed to provoke debate among readers regarding any number of what might be called issues of the heart: the need for frequent reassurances from one's lover, for example, versus the need for patient faith in him or her; the ethics of holding to one's vows even in the long absence of the beloved, who may be dead or whose intentions may have changed; the need to put trust in one's family, including in-laws, versus the possibility that those same people may hold a grudge against one or against one's partner; the need for secrecy in personal relations, sexual relations in particular, versus the possibility that secrecy may clothe deceit; the desire to put the past

⁷⁵ Alone among commentators on *HbM* whose work I have encountered, Alain Renoir, 'The Least Elegiac of the Elegies: A Contextual Glance at *The Husband's Message*', *SN*, 53 (1981), 69–76, has written about the darker aspect of the poem, perceiving that the woman may find the prospect of rejoining the man to be both 'emotionally difficult and physically dangerous' (p. 74). The fact that the man does not come to greet her in person, for example, suggests that his enemies remain a force to be reckoned with.

behind one, including its grief, versus the need to hold some things in memory; the importance of forgiveness versus the call for payback; the contrast of the hopefulness of youth versus the cynicism that results from experience; the place of material wealth in marital relations (would the woman be justified in hesitating to rejoin her husband if he were penniless, or should she go to him because he is rich?); and so forth. There is no end to the ethical and existential questions that can arise when the two poems are read in conjunction.

Since *The Husband's Message* alone has been my concern here, the question of its relation to other poems of the Exeter Book will have to be deferred. Still, I will close by suggesting that if critics are justified in speaking of a 'Marriage Group' in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, which include such different but related pieces as the Clerk's story of patient Griselda and the Wife of Bath's famous monologue in praise of female dominance, then perhaps there is reason to regard *The Wife's Lament* and *The Husband's Message* as a dedicated 'Lost Husband Mini-Group' that has a special place within the generic clusterings of the Exeter Book. One poem reveals the devastation that follows when a love affair goes bad and a woman feels herself forsaken. The other shows the triumph of a man's hope in the midst of recalcitrant circumstances. One poem impresses through its pathos, the other through its rhetorical subtlety and bold conceits. Together, they make a fair display of the emotional range as well as the ingenuity of English literature before the Conquest.

RUNIC HERMENEUTICS IN *THE RUNE POEM*

Most accounts of the Old English runic alphabet are based on the assumption that the runes had conventional names, even if some of those names are obscure today. Furthermore, modern scholars tend to take for granted that both the authors and the original readers of runic passages must have known what the rune-names were.¹ Although such assumptions

I wish to express my gratitude to J. R. Hall, who read a draft of this chapter and made generous suggestions as to how to improve it (while remaining sceptical about some of my conclusions about particular rune-names, I am sure). Later I shall have occasion to cite specific instances of my indebtedness to Hall's essay 'Perspective and Wordplay in the Old English *Rune Poem*', *Neoph*, 61 (1977), 453–60, which first directed serious literary attention to this poem. I also wish to thank Inmaculada Senra Silva, who stimulated my thoughts through a paper she presented on 'The Old English Rune-Names *Ōs* and *Tīr*' at the annual meeting of SELIM held in Seville, Spain, in October 2004. This paper was based on her unpublished doctoral dissertation 'The Significance of the Rune-Names: Evidence from the Anglo-Saxon and Nordic Sources' (University of Seville, 2003), which I have not had the opportunity to consult. Reaching me too late to make use of it here is Robert DiNapoli, 'Odd Characters: Runes in Old English Poetry', in *Verbal Encounters: Anglo-Saxon and Old Norse Studies for Roberta Frank*, ed. by Antonina Harbus and Russell Poole (Toronto, 2005), pp. 145–61, a well-written study that expresses the current 'consensus position' regarding the runes and their names.

¹ In general this is the position of R. Derolez, *Runica Manuscripta: The English Tradition*, Werken Uitgegeven door de Faculteit van de Wijsbegeerte en Letteren, 118 (Brugge, 1954), e.g. at pp. 391, 394, 396. Derolez grants, all the same, that 'Most rune-names were low-frequency words; some were extremely rare' (p. 401). Ralph W. V. Elliott has been the staunchest advocate of the position that the names of the runes in the poems of Cynewulf were fixed commodities; see my discussion at the beginning of the next chapter, at pp. 287–88 below.

may seem natural, they are not necessarily justified.² The preconception that all the runes had fixed, known names may even have led to no small amount of confusion in the scholarly literature. As long as scholars attempting to interpret the runic passages embedded in Old English literary texts have agreed on the 'rules of the game', the effort to identify the meaning of a rune has been seen as no more than a problem in the local application of a pre-existing system of nomenclature. In those instances where no satisfactory way of accounting for the use of a rune can be found (despite heroic efforts to stretch the meaning of its supposed name), then the blame for that state of affairs is attributed either to a garbled manuscript tradition or to our ignorance of matters that were once common knowledge. So it goes for rune after rune, with each failure (if failure be acknowledged) being perceived as a special exception to the 'rules'.

Fresh insight into the use of runes in the Old English literary context can be gained by entertaining a contrary assumption: namely, that the names that today are ascribed to some runes had only a limited basis in tradition.³ If the runes that

² Of particular relevance in this connection is the work of the scribe who added English rune-names and Latin glosses to the list of runes included on fol. 10^v of London, British Library, Cotton MSS, Domitian A IX (a facsimile of which is included in George Hickes's *Linguarum Veterum Septentrionalium Thesaurus* (Oxford, 1703), p. 136). As C. L. Wrenn has pointed out in 'Late Old English Rune-Names', *MÆ*, 1 (1932), 24–34, 'This second scribe was [...] grossly ignorant. The following is a list of his most significant errors: the *ēoh* (or *ēoh*)-rune is explained by *sigel*; the *S*-rune by *r*; the sign for *ear* as *tir*; while the runes *dæg* and *mann* are utterly confused. Furthermore, *consilium* is given as the Latin equivalent of *rad*' (p. 28). Wrenn cites other instances of this scribe's ignorance of features of Anglo-Saxon rune-lore that are common knowledge today. And this flawed manuscript is not a minor one, for Wrenn regards it, despite its errors, as the best of the extant authorities for the later Old English futhorc.

³ Contributing to the conviction that runes had fixed, known names is the assumption, unquestioned by most scholars of an earlier generation, that Old English poetry generally dates from relatively early in the Anglo-Saxon period. The current tendency is to date many poems much closer to the date of the extant manuscripts in which they are written. This difference of perspective in regard to dating has a bearing on my approach, for the later the poetry is dated, the more remote its authors and readers were from the Germanic peoples who first made use of the runes. Correspondingly, the more attractive the hypothesis becomes that runes were used by authors and scribes of later Anglo-Saxon England in a variety of self-conscious ways, sometimes as no more than alternate ('defamiliarized') forms of roman letters, rather than as a writing system with its own integrity. Suspicions along these lines ought to be fuelled by R. I. Page's characterization of the extant *runica manuscripta* of this period — in particular, the lists of runes that occur in Anglo-Saxon manuscripts — as 'preserved in miscellanies of scientific knowledge, among computistical or mathematical lore, in company with etymological and grammatical treatises, or with lists of exotic alphabets, cryptograms, and puzzles' (p. 60). Page

are written out in manuscript sources stood for predictable phonetic values but did not necessarily have fixed names, then within certain limits, authors may have felt free to play cryptographic games with those symbols. Correspondingly, as readers of these poems, we too are free within certain limits to try to crack their implied riddles with all the wit at our disposal, basing our educated guesses upon how each rune is used in context. My aim here is to make a sustained effort in that direction, offering fresh interpretations of how certain individual runes are to be interpreted in the text known as *The Rune Poem*.

Among the many Anglo-Saxon authors who had a taste for linguistic and cryptographic play, the unknown author of *The Rune Poem* stands out. As John Mitchell Kemble noted long ago, that poem is 'the most instructive [. . .] of all the documents we possess'⁴ on the topic of Old English runes. With regard to its occasional play with the onomastic value of those runes, *The Rune Poem* is comparable to a cluster of other Old English literary texts in which runes are embedded. If this wider claim is accepted, then what we are dealing with is not the isolated practice of one author (whom I will call 'the Rune-poet' with a capital R, with a nod to his literary skills). Rather, it is a manner of writing and reading cryptographic symbols that had some general currency among members of an Anglo-Saxon textual community, among whom can be counted the author of *The Husband's Message* (discussed in the previous chapter) and the poet Cynewulf (discussed in the next). Elsewhere in this book, drawing implicitly on the writings of Brian Stock with regard to the interplay of literacy and orality in medieval Europe,⁵ I use the term 'textual community' to refer to persons who were (or could have been) in face-to-face contact with one another and who were therefore in a position to talk about texts. Here I use that term to refer to authors working in a similar medium, in the same broadly defined literary period, who would have understood one another's style.

draws the conclusion that 'the compilers of these pages seem to have thought of English runes as just another curious script' (p. 62).

⁴ John M. Kemble, 'On Anglo-Saxon Runes', *Archaeologia*, 28 (1840), 327–72, repr. with additional notes and translations by Bill Griffiths, *Anglo-Saxon Runes* (Pinner, Middlesex, 1991), p. 28.

⁵ Brian Stock, *The Implications of Literacy: Written Language and Models of Interpretation in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries* (Princeton, NJ, 1983), and *Listening for the Text: On the Uses of the Past* (Baltimore, MD, 1990).

My argument adapts to fresh purposes a heresy associated with the name of Moritz Trautmann.⁶ This is that rather than simply listing the runes of the futhorc while adding some descriptive verse stanzas that play off the conventional names of those runes, the Rune-poet sometimes offers his readers a riddle-like challenge through use of a runic letter that represents an initialism. In order to infer the word that is to be guessed, the reader must take into account three main factors: (1) the traditional name of that rune, if it has one; (2) the phonetic value of the rune, which (with a few possible exceptions) ought to be known to anyone who has studied the runes at all; and (3) the linguistic and poetic context in which the rune is embedded. The demands of metre can be a fourth factor in determining what kind of word to supply, e.g. a monosyllabic word versus a disyllabic one.⁷ When the name of a rune is not a matter of common knowledge, then readers must draw on their powers of ingenuity to deduce what word is signified. Furthermore, even runes that had well-known traditional names are not exempt from this kind of wordplay and this corresponding hermeneutic challenge, for in rare instances the accepted name leads only to nonsense. In such an event, I suggest, the ‘rules of the game’ governing the interpretation of the passage are that the reader must seek out a word, starting with that same speech-sound, that makes for an elegant fit in this context.

By characterizing my approach to the rune-names as a heresy, I am calling attention to the way that a different model of interpretation has congealed into hard doctrine — so much so that alternative hermeneutic models tend to be

⁶ M. Trautmann, ‘Kynewulf der Bischof und Dichter: Untersuchungen über seine Werke und sein Leben’, *Bonner Beiträge zur Anglistik*, 1 (1898), 1–123 (at p. 45). Trautmann’s claim is based in part on his interpretation of the runic passage in *The Husband’s Message* (which I discuss from a different perspective at pp. 234–42 above), and in part on his understanding that the **W**-rune is used by the scribe of the Vercelli Book poem *Elene* to stand for *weard* rather than *wynn*, its conventional name. That last point can be debated, as readers with a close knowledge of that poem will be aware. George Philip Krapp, ed., *The Vercelli Book*, ASPR, 6 (New York, 1932), expands that runic symbol in such a manner as to yield the phrases *weroda wyn* ‘joy of hosts’ (788a) and *on wuldres wyn* ‘into the joy of heaven’ (1089a). Those who accept Trautmann’s approach would read *weroda weard* ‘guardian of hosts’ and *on wuldres weard* ‘to the guardian of heaven’ in those two verses, respectively. I favour these latter readings on the basis of many similar phrases that are attested in the Anglo-Saxon poetic records, e.g. *weroda god* (*Elene* 1149b) and *on wuldres weard* (*Elene* 84a).

⁷ Metre can also help to determine if a rune-name is to be sounded out at all. Elsewhere in the Old English records, runes are sometimes used (with no reference to their names) as no more than defamiliarized roman letters. For examples from *Solomon and Saturn I* and the Exeter Book riddles, see Page, pp. 187–89.

ruled out rather than being explored as possible sources of new insight. Trautmann, however, was nobody's fool.⁸ His approach to the runes and their names has been assimilated into T. A. Shippey's reasonable view that Cynewulf probably assumed that the conventional names for the runes 'could be replaced by other and more common words' in instances where the conventional names would result in near-nonsense.⁹ More recently S. A. J. Bradley, when discussing the art of Cynewulf's runic signatures, has reiterated the same point that 'the possibility must be considered that a given rune may be used for any word beginning with that letter which is appropriate in the given context of sense and metre'.¹⁰ It therefore seems prudent to approach the topic of the literary use of the runes in Old English poetry without preconceptions as to what an author of that time could or could not do.

From the outset it should be understood that I do not conceive of my remarks as a contribution to the science of runology,¹¹ but rather as an exercise in the interpretation of a particular text. The 'new rune-names' that I will propose are unlikely to have any validity beyond the individual, artful passages in which they occur, where they serve as the answers to certain implied riddles. Still, if my argument is accepted, it will have wider implications, for it requires reconsideration of some claims that have been repeated so often in the scholarly literature as to have acquired the status of facts. In addition, my remarks will have some implications for literary history, for inseparable from my claims about the runes and their names is the belief that Old English poetry contains more challenges to the reader's wits than is commonly realized, and that it therefore ought to be approached more often in the spirit of play. While the 'doom and gloom' side

⁸ A conversation with Michael Lapidge on the topic of textual emendation has encouraged me to regard Trautmann as the most brilliant textual editor of his generation to work on Old English texts, even though a number of his individual judgements can be resisted.

⁹ T. A. Shippey, *Old English Verse* (London, 1972), p. 157. Shippey writes with particular reference to the C-rune **h**, the Y-rune **ŷ**, and the U-rune **ŭ**.

¹⁰ *Anglo-Saxon Poetry*, ed. and trans. by S. A. J. Bradley (London, 1982), p. 218.

¹¹ There is a large scholarly literature on the runes. Since most of it is framed as a contribution to either archaeology or philology in a narrow sense, the bulk of it has no bearing one way or another on my arguments regarding the literary use of the runes in certain discrete texts from the Old English period. For an up-to-date survey of runic scholarship on the Scandinavian side (one that focuses on epigraphy rather than *runica manuscripta*), see James E. Knirk, 'Runes and Runic Inscriptions', in *Medieval Scandinavia*, pp. 545–55 (with sections written by Marie Stoklund and Elisabeth Svärdström). R. I. Page's article on 'Runes' in *Blackwell Encyclopaedia* provides an entry point for novices and an anchor for the learned.

of Old English literature cannot be denied, its ludic side also deserves acknowledgement, and indeed a trend in that direction can now be perceived.¹²

How Fixed Were the Names of the Runes?

Fortunately, a good deal of knowledge about the runes is on a secure footing and need not be questioned. There is no doubt that many of the rune-names were standard items that were widely known in Anglo-Saxon England.¹³ This is particularly true of the runes of the older Germanic futhorc, which is the basis of the expanded Old English futhorc that is my main concern here.¹⁴ The **F**-rune **ƿ**, for example, stands for the word *feoh* 'wealth' in all the extant English records where a name can be inferred, and no other name for that rune is attested in the cognate early Germanic languages. Other rune-names figure in the various early Germanic sources with almost equal stability, although with some minor semantic variation as well. To cite their customary English forms and names, these include **R** *rād* 'road, bridle path', **H** *hægl* 'hail', **T** *nȳd* 'need, necessity, want', **I** *īs* 'ice', **Ð** *gēr* 'autumn, year, harvest', **↑** *tīr* 'the god Týr or Tiw', 'glory', **M** *monn* 'human

¹² Chapter 1 above, 'Exeter Book Riddle 74 and the Play of the Text', provides one illustration of this approach to Old English poetry. Hall, 'Perspective and Wordplay', points out many instances of wit and wordplay in that poem. In a seminal essay, Roberta Frank, 'The Uses of Paronomasia in Old English Scriptural Verse', *Speculum*, 47 (1972), 207–26, calls attention to the frequency with which the authors of devotional works play on words in a punning fashion. The presence of humour of many kinds in Old English literature is discussed by the contributors to *Humour in Anglo-Saxon England*, ed. by Jonathan Wilcox (Rochester, NY, 2000).

¹³ For systematic discussion of the runes of the Old English futhorc and their semantic values, see Halsall, pp. 95–163, and Page, pp. 65–76. A learned review of the rune-names, together with an attempt to relate that nomenclature to features of the early Germanic world view, is offered by E. Palomé, 'The Names of the Runes', in Bammesberger, pp. 421–38.

¹⁴ I follow accepted practice in distinguishing the name of the expanded Old English runic alphabet (the *futhorc*) from the name of the primitive Germanic runic alphabet (the *futhork*). The distinction in the two names is properly not one of letters but of the phonetic value of the second vowel. David N. Parsons, *Recasting the Runes: The Reform of the Anglo-Saxon Futhorc* (Uppsala, 1999), has recently argued that an English 'common form' of the futhorc was adopted, perhaps in a monastic setting, before the end of the seventh century and was thereafter respected in both epigraphy and manuscript writings. His arguments are plausible but remain speculative given the spotty nature of the evidence.

being, man', Γ *lagu* 'sea, ocean, body of water', and \mathfrak{B} *beorc* 'the birch'.¹⁵ Concerning the conventional names of those runes there is little room for debate. The same is true of other runes whose names are stable in the Anglo-Saxon context even if not in the other early Germanic dialects. These include \mathfrak{X} *gyfu* 'gift, generosity', \mathfrak{W} *wynn* 'joy, material comfort', \mathfrak{J} *ēoh* 'the yew', \mathfrak{H} *dæg* 'day, daylight', \mathfrak{F} *āc* 'the oak', and \mathfrak{F} *æsc* 'the ash'. All these names are common OE nouns and there ought to be nothing particularly problematic about them, though specialists will be aware of minor controversies that need not concern us here.

Worth noting in this connection is the fact that some of the literary texts that depend on runic lore would fail of their purpose if the rune-names were not already known to readers. The 'inverted' riddling strategy of Exeter Book Riddle 42 is an instance. Here, instead of providing the runic letters and requiring the reader to supply the corresponding names, the author provides the names and the reader must supply the corresponding symbols. The words that are provided in the text are *nȳd* 'necessity', to be counted twice; a single *æsc* 'ash tree'; *ācas twēgen* 'a pair of oaks', and just as many *hægelas* 'hails' — that is, another two instances of the **H**-rune. What the reader must do, then, is first supply the corresponding runes $\mathfrak{t} \mathfrak{t} \mathfrak{F} \mathfrak{F} \mathfrak{H} \mathfrak{H}$, and then transliterate those symbols into their roman equivalents **NNÆAAHH**. When these letters are unscrambled, they spell out the riddle's solution, which consists of the two words *hana* 'cock' and *han* 'hen'.¹⁶ Here the rune-names are assumed to be common knowledge; or to put the matter more accurately, what will distinguish a successful reader from a frustrated reader of Riddle 42 is one's knowledge of the names.

As is well known, however, even some of the runes of the older futhork did not always bear the same name. In English tradition, for example, \mathfrak{P} denotes *þorn* 'thorn', and modern editors and readers of Old and Middle English texts still call that symbol by that name. In the Old Icelandic *Rune Poem*, however, the same runic letter denotes *þurs* 'a giant' and also, apparently, 'a women's malady'

¹⁵ In *The Rune Poem*, however, the 'birch' rune is deployed in a unique manner, as will be seen below (at pp. 268–71).

¹⁶ Krapp and Dobbie, pp. 203–04; Williamson, p. 95 (his riddle no. 40). Exeter Book riddles whose solution depends on a knowledge of runes are discussed by Roberta J. Dewa, 'The Runic Riddles of the Exeter Book: Language Games and Anglo-Saxon Scholarship', *Nottingham Medieval Studies*, 39 (1995), 26–36. Viewing the runic riddles as exercises in wit and learning, Dewa approaches them as products of the Anglo-Saxon scriptorium that have little to do with a living system of writing.

of some kind.¹⁷ The runes and their phonetic value are the same, but their semantic value differs.

Similarly and more instructively, the English vowel-rune **ƿ**, which in the Old Icelandic *Rune Poem* is written in the older form **ᚠ**, is glossed there (to cite that gloss in translation) as ‘ancient creator / and king of Asgard / and lord of Valhalla’ and is further glossed ‘Jupiter’.¹⁸ Clearly that rune stands for the word *óss* ‘deity’, perhaps specifically denoting the high god Óðinn. Just as clearly, however, the rune is used in the Old English *Rune Poem* with a different meaning, for there it is accompanied by the following verse:

ƿ byþ ordfruma ælcra spræce
 wisdomes wraþu and witena frofur
 and eorla gehwam eadnys and tohiht. (stanza 4, lines 10–12)¹⁹

The editor of the standard modern edition of this poem, Maureen Halsall, rightly translates this stanza as follows:

The mouth is the source of every utterance,
 the support of wisdom and a comfort to wise men
 and the joy and delight of every noble. (p. 87)

What the symbol **ƿ** is most reasonably taken to denote in this verse paragraph is the Latin word *os* ‘mouth’, which is homophonic with Old Icelandic *óss* or *áss* (pl. *æsir*) as well as with Old Germanic *ās* ‘deity’. In this instance, the best way

¹⁷ **ᚢ** (*purs*) er kvenna kvöl’ (stanza 3, line 7). For the sake of convenience, here and elsewhere I cite the text of the Old Icelandic *Rune Poem* as given by Halsall in her appendix B, pp. 183–86. Also provided in Halsall’s appendix B are the texts of the *Abecedarium Nordmannicum* (p. 181) and the Old Norwegian *Rune Poem* (pp. 181–83). Page makes strategic reference to Scandinavian sources at pp. 65–76 of his *Introduction*. See further Margaret Clunies Ross, ‘The Anglo-Saxon and Norse *Rune Poems*: A Comparative Study’, *ASE*, 19 (1990), 23–39; Page, ‘The Old Icelandic Rune Poem’, *Nottingham Medieval Studies*, 42 (1998), 1–37; and Page, ‘On the Norwegian Rune Poem’, in *Runica-Germanica-Mediaevalia*, ed. by Wilhelm Heizmann and Astrid van Nahl, *Ergänzungsbände zum Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde*, 37 (Berlin, 2003), pp. 553–66.

¹⁸ **ᚠ** (*óss*) er aldingautr / ok ásgarðs jöfurr / ok valhallar vísi’ (stanza 4, lines 10–12): Halsall, p. 184, stanza 4.

¹⁹ Quotations from *The Rune Poem* in this chapter are from the edition by Halsall, pp. 86–93 (here at p. 86). I depart from Halsall’s practice, however, in that I leave unexpressed the Old English words that are thought to be denoted by the runes. Halsall supplies those names in parentheses, but the effect of that editorial choice is to dispel any mystery (and hence foreclose any debate) concerning what word is meant. Often the initial phoneme of the name can be inferred from the alliteration of the line, if it is not obvious from the runic symbol itself.

of accounting for the fact that the same rune means ‘a god’ in these sources and ‘the mouth’ or by extension ‘the voice’ or ‘eloquence’ in the Old English *Rune Poem* is to suppose that a primitive Germanic name, preserved in Scandinavia, was replaced in England by a newer one involving bilingual wordplay. Since there is no evidence that the newer name ever gained general currency, one suspects that it is the result of a punning impulse on the part of an author who was competent in both Latin and the vernacular. The pun is an apt one, for the new name, unlike the old, would have caused no offence in a manuscript that was meant for use in a monastic context. The poet’s emphasis on eloquent speech as the source of wisdom would have been appreciated in a setting where the routine of the day was organized via the liturgical hours with their psalms, hymns, scriptural readings, and so forth. Here is an instance where the pagan associations of an old rune-name are purged, while its phonetic value is used as the basis of a new name involving a bilingual pun.²⁰

Another example, although more speculative, will confirm that there was room for some creativity in the use of runes and their names. The author of *The Rune Poem* also employs the symbol ↑, another Old Germanic rune with pagan associations. This rune is glossed in the Old Icelandic *Rune Poem* as ‘the one-handed member of the Æsir’, thus obviously denoting the god Týr,²¹ and this name (or a phonetic variation of it) is assumed to be the Old Germanic name for this rune. In the Old English *Rune Poem*, however, the ↑ rune is used to denote a constellation or star, for it is said to be *tācna sum* ‘one of the guiding signs’ that ‘keeps its faith well’ for ‘always it holds its course’ by night.²² The name of this rune is probably the very same word as before, namely *Tīw* (the English equivalent of Týr, as in the proper noun ‘Tuesday’). Rather than denoting a god of the old pagan pantheon, however, what that word is best construed as signifying here is ‘the planet Mars’, for the Roman god Mars was sometimes regarded as the equivalent of the Germanic deity Tiw.²³ In *The Rune Poem*, the planet Mars is

²⁰ It is possible, all the same, that those older religious associations could remain as a trace element for readers familiar with the earlier name for the rune. After all, the statement ‘a divine power is the source of every utterance’ is coherent regardless of whether one is a devotee of Óðinn or a reader of the incipit of the Gospel of John.

²¹ ‘↑ (Týr) er einhendr áss’: Halsall, p. 185 (citing line 34 of the Old Icelandic poem). The reading of the Norwegian *Rune Poem* is virtually identical (Halsall, p. 183).

²² Halsall, pp. 90–91 (stanza 17, lines 48–50).

²³ In the Old Icelandic *Rune Poem*, for example, the word *Mars* glosses the ↑ rune (Halsall, p. 185, stanza 12), just as in Old English glossaries, one or another variant form of the word *Tīw*

aply designated as ‘one of the guiding signs’, not because navigators can regularly take their bearings from it but because its brilliance in the night sky and its changing position relative to the fixed stars make it a prominent astrological sign. Tiw — alias Mars — ‘keeps its faith’ in terms of its steady presence in the sky, night after night, slowly shifting position in accord with the differential rotation of the spheres, according to the Ptolomaic model of the universe that the Anglo-Saxons and their neighbours inherited from Rome. In *The Rune Poem*, the *Týr/Tiw* rune (just as we have seen with the *óss/ós* rune) was purged of its pagan associations. The word that the rune stands for remains unchanged, but what that word denotes is not a pagan deity but rather a planet associated with that god.²⁴

The semantic value of a rune was therefore subject to authorial determination to a certain extent. In *The Rune Poem*, a creative person — the author of that poem, I assume, though it could have been some prior writer with an interest in cryptography and wordplay — seems to have used several of the rune-signs as

glosses Lat. *Mars*. See B-T, s.v. *Tiw*. The learned author Byrhtferth of Ramsey (c. 970–1020) equated the names Tiw and Mars when discussing the name of the day of the week that precedes Wednesday: see *Byrhtferth’s Enchiridion*, ed. by Peter S. Baker and Michael Lapidge, EETS SS, 15 (Oxford, 1995), II.3.225–27 (at p. 118). It is not surprising that a learned author of that time should have used the name *Tiw* (originally denoting a pagan deity associated with war and glory) in reference to the planet Mars, whatever the native English name for that planet may have been. Some readers may prefer to follow Halsall in identifying *Tiw* (or *Tir*, as she presents the name on the basis of eleventh-century rune lists that appear to show Old Norse influence) as referring to ‘some unknown constellation’ rather than the planet Mars. The ‘Mars’ solution is accepted by Bill Griffiths, *Aspects of Anglo-Saxon Magic*, 2nd edn (Hockwold-cum-Wilton, Norfolk, 2003), p. 221.

²⁴ One may wish to compare my discussion of the ↑ rune with Marijane Osborn’s thorough and wide-ranging discussion of that same rune and its name in an article that I was able to consult only after having readied the present chapter for print. In her study ‘*Tir* as Mars in the Old English *Rune Poem*’, *ANQ*, 16.1 (2003), 3–12, Osborn argues that this rune is deliberately cleansed of its pagan associations so as to refer to the planet Mars — and to refer to Mars not as a Roman god, nor in connection with astrology, but as a practical navigational aid. Her point about practical navigation is better judged by other persons than myself, but regardless of its validity, such an approach does not rule out the possibility that learned persons may have been more interested in the astrological role of the planet Mars than in its usefulness for wayfarers. Another of the runes of *The Rune Poem* that is used in a creative and idiosyncratic way is the S-rune, often construed as *sigel* ‘jewel’, hence metaphorically ‘sun’, on the basis of rune-lists but here used to stand for *segl* ‘sail’, hence metaphorically ‘ship’ (in stanza 16). This instance need not be addressed here because it has been definitively explained by Peter Nicholson, ‘The Old English Rune for S’, *JEGP*, 81 (1982), 313–19, as is mentioned in the previous chapter (at pp. 236 and 239).

small riddles, the answers to which render those names innocuous in a Christian setting. Modern readers often approach these runic passages assuming that their Anglo-Saxon counterparts would already have known 'the names of the runes' and so would have been able to read the poem with no difficulty. My contrary assumption is that readers of *The Rune Poem* must draw on all their intellectual resources, including their cryptographic lore, their linguistic skills as Latinists as well as native speakers of English, and their scientific or mythological knowledge, in an attempt to discern what names make the most elegant 'fit' for these runes in these passages. One is expected to recognize the shapes of the runes and to know their phonetic values and even (in most instances) their traditional names, but one must still infer what word the rune stands for in a given line.

I am not making a categorical claim about runes and their semantic indeterminacy. Some rune-names are not subject to riddling; their names do not change. But rarely, certain runes that are deployed in Old English literary texts have names that must be guessed on an ad hoc basis. In order to construe these passages correctly, one must be alert as to exactly how the rune is used. The word designated by the rune can thus be specific to a single passage. In order to gain acceptance as the 'right' word, it does not have to be corroborated from any other source, whether etymology or comparative runology. The use of ƿ to stand for Latin *ōs* 'mouth', to return to that example, is a witticism that is unique to the Old English *Rune Poem*. That Latin word is not 'the name of the Old English ƿ rune'; rather, its employment in this instance is evidence of a poet's ingenuity.

The same point can be phrased in more pragmatic terms. From the author's perspective, if one wants to incorporate into a piece of writing a rune that does not have a well-known conventional name, then that rune can be used to signify any apt word beginning with that sound. Even a rune with a well-known name is not necessarily exempt from this process of wordplay and this implied challenge to the reader to 'guess my name', as in the Exeter Book riddles.²⁵ Conversely, from the reader's perspective, the strategy of finding the name that provides a felicitous 'fit' for a rune in a given instance is much like what is required in the riddles, where (as I have argued in previous chapters) sometimes the answer to a riddle is not just a concept, but rather a specific word. An example is the feminine noun *sulh* 'plough', the linguistically precise answer to Riddle

²⁵ In the Exeter Book riddles, this challenge is made explicit by the challenge *Saga hwæt ic hatte* 'Say what I am called', a phrase that is repeated verbatim a dozen times (leaving aside variant forms such as *Saga hwæt hio hatte* 'Say what it is called'). In *The Rune Poem*, symbol after symbol is listed with the same implied challenge to speak its name.

21.²⁶ More precisely, one could say that the answer to Riddle 21 is the concept ‘plough’ as expressed in its period-specific name, *sulh*. In similar fashion, the ‘answer’ to the ‘riddle’ of one of the runes in *The Rune Poem* is the concept of that rune as expressed in a word of the required initial sound that serves as the head-word of the following sentence.

The Rune Poem and its Enigmas

If no more than a single example of the creative use of runes that I have cited thus far in either this chapter or the preceding one is found persuasive, then the way is smoothed for the main task that I wish to undertake. This is to offer fresh interpretations of a number of disputed passages of *The Rune Poem*. The rules of the game of ‘creative runography’ will have been laid down for readers either to enjoy or deplore, as their spirit may move. Even if each and every one of these preliminary examples should be rejected, however, I trust that the points that follow will still be evaluated on their merits, despite their departure from a consensus of prior scholarship.

As is well known, the unique manuscript that once contained *The Rune Poem* (London, British Library, Cotton MSS, Otho B X) was virtually destroyed by the fire that swept through the Cotton collection in 1731. Modern editors agree that, unlike modern printed editions of that poem, the original manuscript text did not include the names of the runes. Instead, that text would have consisted of only the letters of the expanded Anglo-Saxon futhorc with a short verse paragraph appended to each. Each verse stanza thus would have served as a brief, sometimes tantalizing definition of a word that must be guessed. As in the runic passage in *The Husband’s Message* and as in Cynewulf’s runic signatures, the reader of *The Rune Poem* in its original form either would have had to have prior knowledge of the ‘correct’ name for a rune, or else would have had to guess that name on the basis of inference from the passage in question. The poem is thus both a test of knowledge and a real challenge to ingenuity.

Before discussing certain problems relating to those rune-names, it is worth contemplating the aptness of the phrase ‘challenge to ingenuity’ as an entry point to *The Rune Poem* as a whole. Granted, that poem can be mined as a source of information regarding the Anglo-Saxons’ knowledge of and use of the runes. It

²⁶ A grammatically feminine solution is required because of the feminine inflections in the phrases *me* [. . .] *gongendre* (9a) and *me* [. . .] *hindewardre* (14b–15a). The correct solution is thus the word *sulh* and not the general concept ‘plough’.

can also serve as a display case for what is now known about the runes from any source. The poem has been exploited as such at least since Hickes's collated edition of 1703 (Fig. 8), and modern editions such as Halsall's follow Hickes's precedent while being yet more luxuriant in their citation of runic lore. As originally written out in Cotton MSS, Otho B X, however, the poem must have had a much sparer character. Without a title, without any overt indication of the rune-names, without any listing of alternate forms of the runes, without a facing-page interpretive translation, and without the introduction and other apparatus that provide readers of modern editions with a wealth of useful information, the poem would have been a true example of cryptography. While generically a 'catalogue poem' in that it lists twenty-nine runes in succession with a brief verse paragraph appended to each,²⁷ *The Rune Poem* would have had a strongly riddle-like character. Moreover, as with the riddles, each of its verse paragraphs provides some aesthetic pleasure. Arresting kennings are employed. The ship is 'the steed of the sea' (*brimhengest*, 47a, 66a); the sea itself, in a more humble metaphor, is the 'fish's bathwater' (*fiscas beþ*, 46b); the yew tree, which yields prime hardwood logs, is 'the shepherd (or custodian) of fire' (*hyrde fyres*, 36b); ice is 'a pavement made of frost' (*flōr forste geworuh*t, 31a). There is a sly dig at heroic pretensions when the bridle path, or by extension the act of horse-riding (the rune-name *rād*), is said to be no trouble at all for warriors sitting in the hall, where they may be quaffing beer and boasting of their exploits, but 'very strenuous for one who bestrides a powerful horse travelling the long roads'.²⁸ There is another small joke when the **Ń** rune is defined in riddling fashion as 'the whitest of all kernels of grain' (*hwitust corna*, 25a). Only a moment's reflection is required for one to see the irony that resides in this capsule definition of hail, a 'grain' that can destroy grain. Christian paradox can be found in the poem, as well: wealth (*feoh*), though ever coveted, is a potential curse (2–3), while constraint or hardship (*njād*), though ever shunned, can be a source of help and even salvation if one pays heed to it in time (27–28). As in the Exeter Book riddles, things undergo metamorphoses. The yew tree, as we have seen, is regarded in two moments of its existence as both a rooted tree and a log on the fire (35–37). The ash tree, as we shall see in due time, both towers into the sky and, when transformed by the carpenter's skills, is made into a swift ship (81–83). Personification too is at work, as

²⁷ I borrow that generic term from Nicholas Howe, *The Old English Catalogue Poems*, Anglistica, 23 (Copenhagen, 1985). Although *The Rune Poem* does not happen to figure among the catalogue poems discussed by Howe, it fits that category well.

²⁸ Lines 13–15, trans. by Halsall, p. 87.

when *þorn* ‘thorn’ is described in the plural, in Halsall’s translation, as ‘terribly fierce / to anyone who takes his rest among them’ (*ungemetun reþe / manna gehwylcun ðe him mid resteð*, 8b–9). This statement gains some poignancy if we recall that the OE noun *þorn* often denotes not ‘thorn’ in general but specifically ‘the hawthorn’ (also known as ‘the whitethorn’ or simply ‘the thorn’). Since ancient times, thorn hedges have been used as field-boundaries to deter intruders and keep cattle from straying.²⁹ The Þ rune is thus described as if it were a hedge that, like a guard dog, will turn savage if anyone approaches too near it or — a really bad idea — lies down in the midst of it.³⁰

While the Rune-poet’s literary skills and fascination with linguistic detail are evident throughout, these qualities are especially in evidence in his presentation of the twenty-fifth rune, **ƿ**, an insular derivative of the Old Germanic rune **F**. This rune has the conventional name *āc* ‘the oak’ (*Quercus*). Rather than describing an oak tree in a naturalistic fashion, however, the poet offers the following stanza, which speaks of the oak in such an oblique way as almost to make one doubt that ‘oak tree’ is the answer. When the word *āc* appears in line 80, it thus arrives with some relief:

ƿ byþ on eorþan elda bearnum
flæsces fodor; fereþ gelome
ofer ganotes bæþ; — garsecg fandað
hwæþer ac hæbbe æþele treowe. (stanza 25, lines 77–80)

The following literal translation will clarify the riddling strategies that are in play here.

ƿ, on the ground, is food for flesh for the children of men. It often travels over the gannet’s bathing-place; the ocean tests whether the oak keeps noble faith.

The ‘same’ thing is presented in two phases of its existence, just as with the stanzas devoted to the yew and, as I shall argue in due course, the ash tree and

²⁹ The word appears with some frequency in this sense in the charters, parts of which often consist of little more than an enumeration of field boundaries. Bosworth and Toller, s.v. *þorn*, define that word as either ‘a thorn, the prickle of a plant’ or ‘a plant on which such prickles grow’. Halsall’s translation of *him mid* in line 9 of *The Rune Poem* by the plural phrase ‘among them’, as opposed to the singular phrase ‘in it’, involves an unnecessary shift from the singular noun *þorn* ‘thorn tree, hawthorn’ (as opposed to *þornas* ‘spines’) to the pronoun *him* construed in the plural.

³⁰ The meaning ‘to lie down’ (here, to lie down in the midst of a thorn bush or hedge) is specifically implied by the verb *restan*, which normally means ‘to rest on a couch, to sleep’ (B-T, s.v. *restan*, intrans., sense 2).

a fourth tree that has always been taken to be the birch (stanzas 13, 26, and 18 respectively). In riddling fashion, however, the oak is never seen in its primary form as a tree that is firmly rooted and towers into the sky. Instead, by daring synecdoche, it is seen first in the form of acorns, which provide mast for swine, who are encouraged to fatten themselves in the woods before being slaughtered in preparation for midwinter feasting. To complicate the picture, the swine too are never named directly or seen in their animal form; they are only referred to as *flæsc* ‘flesh, meat’ (78a) destined for the tables of human beings (the ‘sons of men’). So a striking paradox is introduced: the oak tree provides meat for human consumption. And that is only the first paradox in these lines, for the same tree then turns out to be a vagabond. Even if rooted, it apparently cannot resist the call of the wild, for it often fares over the open sea (which in turn is described in riddle-like fashion as the ‘gannet’s bath’). This seeming paradox of the mobile tree can easily be resolved, of course. As soon as one thinks about carpentered objects, one realizes that it is the oak in the sense of *oak timbers* whose truth the ocean will test, once a shipwright has fashioned the timbers into a seaworthy vessel.³¹ As for the last word of stanza 25, it caps this exercise in wit by providing one of the most stylish puns in Old English literature. The sea will test whether or not the *trēow* (the OE neuter noun meaning ‘tree’) has noble *trēowe* (the OE feminine noun meaning ‘truth’).³²

Wordplay of various kinds is thus practically this poet’s signature. His wit is particularly evident in four stanzas (numbers 14, 18, 28, and 29) that will offer surprises to a reader who works his way through them without preconceptions as to what they can and cannot mean. Each stanza deserves attention in turn.

Stanza 14: The P-rune

The fourteenth stanza of *The Rune Poem* reads as follows:

h byþ symble plega and hlehter
 wlancum , ðar wigan sittap
 on beorsele bliþe ætsomne. (stanza 14, lines 38–40)

³¹ Oak was the favoured wood used for the main timbers of sturdy ocean-going ships, as is pointed out in chapter 1 above, at pp. 40–41, where I have occasion to quote this same stanza.

³² Hall, ‘Perspective and Wordplay’, p. 456, offers a thorough and convincing account of the wordplay involved in this stanza. He addresses a number of points touched on in this paragraph.

Taking the **P**-rune to stand for the noun *peorð*, which she takes to denote a table-game of some kind, Halsall offers the following translation:

A table-game is always a source of recreation and amusement
to proud, where warriors sit
happily together in the mead-hall. (p. 89)

The difficulty with this interpretation (ignoring the lacuna in line 39) is that the meaning of the supposed rune-name *peorð* is, as Bosworth and Toller note, ‘doubtful’, for that word is unattested in the Old English literary records. Its only appearance is in rune lists, where it is ascribed no meaning. On the basis of some remote proposed cognates (such as Old Church Slavonic *fert* and Persian *ferz* ‘one of the figures on a chess-board’), some scholars have guessed that what the word signifies is a gaming-piece of some kind, though other suggestions (e.g. ‘throat’, ‘apple-tree’, or ‘penis’) have bravely been advanced as well.³³ The assumption has been that speakers of Old English knew what this word meant even if no one does today. Here is an instance where creative philology may have led commentators astray, for there is no reason to assume that *peorð* would have meant anything more to a person of Anglo-Saxon England than it does to lexicographers today. I therefore suggest that we ask: What **p**-initial word or words did the Anglo-Saxons associate with upper-class amusements in the hall?³⁴

Given the paucity of **p**-initial words in Old English, the number of possibilities is not great. None of the words associated with the consumption of mead or ale and the delights of conversation (two obvious components of convivial experience) will suit our phonological needs. What I therefore propose is that the word to be guessed is drawn from the realm of music. As is well known, Old English poets make frequent reference to the delights of both song and instrumental music. The sense ‘[some kind of music] is always a source of recreation and amusement [. . .] where warriors sit in the hall’ would seem to be a possible avenue leading towards a solution. As for the exact solution, what the noblemen are thought to be hearing with delight, I suggest, is *the sound of the pipe or flute*: OE *pipe* ‘piping or fluting’. Just as the Anglo-Saxons enjoyed the music of the harp, they also took pleasure in piping or fluting. That is why Wulfstan of York

³³ Halsall, p. 128, discusses the various suggestions.

³⁴ A key word here is ‘upper-class’, not ‘martial’. Granted, the noun *wiga* (39b) can specifically denote ‘warrior’. Here the word has a more general sense, however, for when used in the poetry, the noun *wiga*, like such synonyms as *beorn*, *eorl*, *hæleþ*, *rinc*, and *þegn*, denotes ‘a man of aristocratic rank’ or simply ‘a man’. In the context of beer-hall amusements, *wiga* is naturally to be taken as referring to a man of rank whether or not that person is a warrior.

strongly dismisses both harps and wind instruments in his homily ‘De Visione Isaie Prophete’: ‘Hearpe ond pipe and mistlic gliggamen dremað eow on beorsele’, he decries (It is harping and piping (or fluting) and sundry musical interludes that amuse you in the beer-hall), when he would much prefer that people were listening to one of his blistering sermons.³⁵

For many centuries and in many lands, piping and fluting have been favourite sources of entertainment. In order to imagine why Wulfstan disapproved of festive music of this kind, one need only to visualize Chaucer’s coarse Miller leading a parade of pilgrims out onto the road to Canterbury while blowing up a tune on his rustic bagpipes;³⁶ or of Pieter Bruegel the Elder’s famous canvas *The Wedding Dance*, with its tipsy dancers and sturdy piper (1566); or of Chaucer’s amorous Squire, who was what a speaker of Old English would have called a *pipere* ‘flute-player’, for he made apt use of the flute while pursuing the art of love.³⁷ Although the Anglo-Saxons may have been unfamiliar with music of these exact kinds, their knowledge of the pipes is evident from Exeter Book Riddle 31 (solved as ‘bagpipes’).³⁸ Their association of flutes with convivial settings is evident from Riddle 60 (solved as the OE noun *hrēod* ‘reed, reed flute, reed pen’), where allusion is made to the music made by a reed flute sounding out *ofer meodu* ‘over the mead’ or (as editors often emend that phrase for the sake of better metre) *ofer meodubence* ‘over the mead-bench’ (9a).³⁹ But the OE noun *pipe* did not denote any particular type of instrument. The primary meaning of that word was ‘long narrow tube’, and it therefore denoted any of a variety of musical instruments including both ‘flutes’ and ‘pipes’, without regard to what the instrument was made from and how it was blown. Such instruments are fashioned so easily that they are found in practically every culture and have been recovered from many ancient sites. As Graeme Lawson notes in his article on ‘Musical Instruments’ in the *The Blackwell Encyclopaedia of Anglo-Saxon England*, ‘the archaeological record [of early England] is without question

³⁵ *The Homilies of Wulfstan*, ed. by Dorothy Bethurum (Oxford, 1957), p. 217, lines 144–45.

³⁶ Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*, ed. by Larry D. Benson (Boston, MA, 2000), p. 14 (lines 565–66 of the ‘General Prologue’).

³⁷ ‘Syngynge he was, or flotyngge, al the day’. Chaucer, *Canterbury Tales*, ed. by Benson, p. 6 (line 91 of the ‘General Prologue’).

³⁸ Williamson, pp. 86–87 and 233–35 (his riddle no. 29); see my discussion at p. 146 above, note 10.

³⁹ I discuss this riddle at pp. 130–32 above.

dominated by small, apparently home-made, flutes and pipes'.⁴⁰ We do not have to wonder exactly what instrument is denoted in *The Rune Poem*, however, for what the word means here is 'the sound of the pipe or flute', as in the complaint by Wulfstan quoted above. When used in this sense (in a context where reference is made to convivial occasions), the word is very nearly synonymous with the OE noun *pīp-drēam* 'the merry sound of the pipe or flute'.

What the **P**-rune most likely stands for in *The Rune Poem*, therefore, is *pīpe*, and what the poet uses that word to denote is 'piping or fluting', much as that same poet uses the noun *rād* in stanza 5 to denote not 'road' but 'horseback riding'. Of course, we should not think of *pīpe* as 'the name of the **P**-rune' for the simple reason that this young rune, representing what was a rare Old English speech sound in word-initial position, may never have had a conventional name. Still, *pīpe* 'piping or fluting' provides a name for the fourteenth rune of *The Rune Poem* that is philologically sound, contextually appropriate, and culturally apt, whereas *peorð*, the name that has long been accepted on the basis of rune-lists alone, remains (as Page notes) 'a mystery'.⁴¹

*Stanza 18: The **B**-rune*

The eighteenth stanza of *The Rune Poem* provides another instance where accepted wisdom does not lead to an intelligible conclusion. On the face of it, there would seem to be no need to debate the name of the **ᚷ** rune, for that name does not vary in the various early Germanic dialects. Its OE name is *byrc*, spelled in various ways (e.g. *byrce*, *birce*, *bircean*, *beorc*, *berc*) but always denoting 'the

⁴⁰ Graeme Lawson, 'Musical Instruments', in *Blackwell Encyclopaedia*, pp. 328–29 (at p. 328). Lawson calls particular attention to three pipes unearthed at Thetford, Norfolk, that 'appear to be associated with a cellared building at a street corner, suggesting a site of recreational activity — perhaps a tavern' (p. 329, col. 1). The evidence from Thetford suggests that piping or fluting was a favoured amusement up and down the social ladder, not just among the warrior aristocracy. Although Timothy J. McGee, 'Musical Instruments', in *Medieval England*, pp. 533–36 (at p. 534 col. 1), foregoes mention of the evidence for pipes and flutes from this early period, he notes that reed instruments (shawms or bagpipes) are depicted in European manuscript illuminations by the late ninth century and were apparently known in late Anglo-Saxon England, to judge from the inclusion of the noun *rīod-pīpere* 'performer on a reed instrument' in a supplement to Ælfric's Anglo-Latin glossary.

⁴¹ Page, p. 70. Similarly, Griffiths, *Aspects of Anglo-Saxon Magic*, p. 220, finds 'no satisfactory meaning' for *peorð*.

birch tree' (*Betula alba*). Those persons who are fond of associating the runes with pagan beliefs will contemplate that name with satisfaction, for as Halsall remarks, 'as the pre-eminent deciduous tree in northern forests and the first to turn green in the spring, the birch played an important part in Germanic fertility rites'.⁴² Still, anyone who accepts 'birch' as the name of this rune must address a serious problem: the poet's description does not fit that tree. The stanza in question reads as follows:

ᚷ byþ bleða leas; bereþ efne swa ðeah
 tanas butan tudder; biþ on telgum wlitig,
 heah on helme, hrysted fægere;
 geloden leafum, lyfte getenge. (stanza 18, lines 51–54)

Halsall translates these lines thus:

The birch has no fruit; nonetheless it bears
 shoots without seed; it is beautiful in its branches,
 high of crown, fairly adorned;
 tall and leafy, it reaches up to touch the sky. (p. 91)

Although no editor or translator can be held accountable for this state of affairs, there can be no greater absurdity than the claim that 'the birch has no fruit, nonetheless it bears / shoots without seed'. The birch cannot possibly be the tree that is described here, for that tree reproduces itself from seeds in a normal regenerative cycle.⁴³ That is one reason why it once played a part in fertility rites. I therefore suggest that we approach stanza 18 without any preconception as to the identity of the item being described. Furthermore (as is always wise when dealing with these texts), we should entertain the possibility that the Rune-poet has introduced a deliberate ambiguity meant to baffle and lead us astray.

What is apparently being defined in terms of a living tree, I suggest, is actually a word that denotes two things: a tree and something else that is somehow tree-like. The name of the ᚷ rune in the Old English *Rune Poem* is not *byrc*. It is *bōc*. In a moment of mischief, the poet has introduced a twist by associating that rune not with its standard name but with a name, *bōc*, that means both 'beech tree' (*Fagus*) and 'book'. Since those two words are homophones in Old

⁴² Halsall, p. 138.

⁴³ To be precise in this regard, 'the drooping male catkins flower before the leaves emerge; smaller, upright female catkins on the same tree develop in conelike clusters, which disintegrate at maturity, releasing tiny, one-seeded, winged nutlets'. *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 15th edn, Micropaedia (Chicago, 1997), II, s.v. 'birch'.

English, it is possible to pun upon them. In all the Old Germanic dialects, the word *bōc* in its various spellings (whether in the singular or plural form) denotes both 'beech tree' and any of a number of writing surfaces, including 'writing tablet', 'written page', or 'book'.⁴⁴ The riddling strategy that is in evidence here is analogous to the central conceit of Exeter Book Riddle 92, where the word *bōc* is the occasion of a similar pun.⁴⁵ The answer to Riddle 92 is 'a beech tree (*bōc*) and various objects that are made from it'. Those objects significantly include both a splendid codex and, apparently, a domestic writing tablet or rune-stick.

Although stanza 18 of *The Rune Poem* lacks the complexity of Riddle 92 in that its *bōc* is seen in only two of its life forms rather than in half a dozen, the poet fully exploits the ambiguity of the word *bōc*, which must be read now in one sense, now in another, depending on just what is being predicated. The following translation represents a clumsy attempt to communicate the shimmering quality of these verses:

A *boc* has no foliage [when considered as a book]; all the same [in its arboreal form] it bears twigs [just as it bears twig-like letters when considered as a book], but [as a book] it has no offspring. It is beautiful [as a tree] in its branches, high in the sky; it is beautifully ornamented, laden with leaves [when considered as either a tree or a book]; it brushes the sky [as a tree, just as it reaches toward heaven if it is a devotional book].

The Rune-poet paradoxically contrasts the sexless book with the full-grown tree, complete with its branches, twigs, leaves, and fruit, from which seedlings (*tudder*, 52a) will grow. Towards the end of the stanza, the two senses of the word *bōc* coincide. A beech tree is fittingly described as 'beautifully adorned, laden with leaves'. With equal felicity, however (since the OE noun *lēaf* can denote the leaf of either a tree or a book), that same phrase can be taken to describe an ornamented codex. The pun here is especially effective if we think of the leaves of that book as having been illuminated by a goldsmith, who would use gold leaf (OE *gold-lēaf*) to adorn the page. Since the book most likely to be ornamented with gold leaf was a biblical text (normally the Gospels or the psalms), the phrase

⁴⁴ Bosworth and Toller, s.v. *bōc*; the *OED*, s.v. *book*, sb., and *beech*; and the *DOE*, s.v. *bōc* 'book', *bōc* 'beech tree', and *bēce* 'beech tree'. It can be argued that the two homophonic words denoting 'beech tree' and 'book' have the same etymological root. Certainly the bark of the beech tree, which was also known as the *bōc-trēow*, makes a fine writing surface. Since the etymology of this word (or these two related words) is disputed, however, that point can be left aside.

⁴⁵ Williamson, pp. 118 and 391–93 (his riddle no. 88). I discuss Riddle 92 in chapter 4, 'Answering the Riddles in their Own Tongue', at pp. 135–37 above.

lyfte getenge could also connote ‘reaching to heaven’, not just ‘brushing the sky’. As for the twigs of the tree, they are mirrored in stylized form in the shapes of the letters of the alphabet. Stanza 18 of *The Rune Poem* thus presents a small triumph of wit. The name *bōc* that is introduced here for the **B**-rune may be unorthodox. It is certainly difficult to guess, seeing that no modern researcher seems to have guessed it until now. As part of an exercise in literary riddling, all the same, the name works brilliantly in this context. I will go so far as to venture the claim that the word *bōc* is the only solution that resolves what are otherwise the intolerable paradoxes of stanza 18.⁴⁶

Stanzas 28 and 29: The IE- and EA-runes

The last two stanzas of *The Rune Poem* are best discussed together, for they are based on two runes of a similar kind, neither of which formed part of the Old Germanic futhark. Accepting the standard emendation of the first line of stanza 28, the stanzas read as follows:

‡ byþ eafixa; and ðeah a bruceþ
 fodres on foldan; hafap fægerne eard,
 wætre beworpen, ðær he wynnum leofap.

 ƿ byþ egle eorla gehwylcun,
 ðonn fæstlice flæsc onginneþ
 hraw colian, hrusan ceosan
 blac to gebeddan; bleða gedreosaþ,
 wynna gewitaþ, wera geswicap. (stanzas 28–29, lines 87–94)

Halsall translates these stanzas thus:

The eel [*īar*] belongs to the river-fish; and yet it always takes
 its food on land; it has a beautiful dwelling-place,
 surrounded by water, where it lives in delight.

⁴⁶ According to one line of thought, the tree of stanza 18 should be taken to be the poplar, not the birch. Bruce Dickins, for example, advocates this view in *Runic and Heroic Poems of the Old Teutonic Peoples* (Cambridge, 1915), pp. 18–19. In his note to line 51, Dickins points out that OE *birce* (spelled in various ways) sometimes glosses Lat. *populus* ‘poplar-tree’, and he also notes that poplars are ‘almost always grown from slips or suckers’. So the tree in question could be the grey poplar (*Populus canescens*), which is indigenous to Britain. Standing in the way of this interpretation, however, is the stanza’s first verse, which states that the item is *blēða lēas* ‘without shoots, branches, flowers, fruits’ (for OE *blēd* or *blēd* can mean all of those things). Although that verse does not accurately describe the poplar, it can plausibly refer to a book, which paradoxically has ‘leaves’ but no branches or fruit.

Earth [*ēar*] is loathsome to every man,
 when irresistibly the flesh,
 the dead body begins to grow cold,
 the livid one to choose earth as its bedfellow;
 fruits fail, joys vanish, man-made covenants are broken. (p. 93)

With their contrast of beauty and light versus a loathsome corpse, these stanzas draw *The Rune Poem* to an effective close. What I would question, however, are the generally accepted rune-names *īar* ‘eel’ and *ēar* ‘earth’. The first of these postulated names seems to be inspired by the word *ēafixa* ‘of or among river fish’ in the first verse of stanza 28. Whatever the creature or item in question is, it apparently dwells in the water. There are two reasons, however, to question the rune-name *īar* ‘eel’. First, no such noun is attested elsewhere in Old English; once again, a nonce word has been invoked to account for a problematic text. Second, eels are not amphibious creatures. They are aquatic, whereas the subject of these lines is said to be at home both among fish and on dry land. The possibility should thus be considered that something else is meant.

One suggestion that has been raised in the critical literature is that the word in question, still taken to be *īar*, means ‘beaver’.⁴⁷ A beaver might well be said to live in delight in some watery dwelling-place, securing most of its food on land and yet swimming about among fish. Unfortunately for those who find this approach congenial, the word for ‘beaver’ in Old English is *befer* (or *beofor* or *byfer*); there exists no word *īar* meaning ‘beaver’ in Old English.⁴⁸ The conclusion that such a word once existed is based entirely on extrapolation from the Irish noun *iaru*, which denotes a small mammal of some kind, for example, a stoat, squirrel, or weasel. To ascribe the meaning ‘beaver’ to a Gaelic predecessor of that Irish word and then to postulate the use of that noun, in that sense, as a unique loan-word in this Anglo-Saxon context seems a bold act of the philological imagination.

I suggest that as a hermeneutic strategy, therefore, the word *īar* or *īor* that appears in the rune lists be regarded as a ghost word, no more than a vocable that

⁴⁷ Marijane Osborn and Stella Longland, ‘A Celtic Intruder in the Old English *Rune Poem*’, *NM*, 81 (1980), 385–87.

⁴⁸ See the discussion by Audrey L. Meaney, ‘The Hunted and the Hunters: British Mammals in Old English Poetry’, *ASSAH*, 11 (2000), 95–105 (at pp. 96–98). While Meaney finds that ‘the beaver fits the criteria in the *Rune Poem* well’ (p. 97), somewhat better than the otter does (another possible solution), she concedes that no certainty is possible in the absence of a suitable name for the creature in question.

was introduced to aid pronunciation of the symbol that stands for the OE phoneme /iel/, spelled various ways but pronounced [iɛ].⁴⁹ If this surmise is correct, then what should be sought out at this point is an attested OE word that answers to the implied riddle of lines 87–89 and that begins with the sound [iɛ] (which might be spelled *ie*, *ige*, *io*, or otherwise). Moreover, an ideal solution should be masculine in gender so as to agree with the pronoun *hē* in 89b, which refers back most immediately to the masculine noun *ēafix* (that is, *ēa-fisc*, 87a) but which ought also to refer back to the name of the main item whose identity is to be guessed.

Can an *ie*-initial OE word be found that satisfies those conditions? Perhaps, if one is willing to question one's assumptions about the nature of the 'creature' that is being described. Thinking literally (as is almost always a mistake in riddle solving), scholars have assumed that what the rune denotes is an animate being, doubtless an aquatic animal because it dwells among fishes. They may have thus overlooked the trick of personification that is often employed in the riddles of the Exeter Book, where an item that is either inanimate or unendowed with intelligence (such as a rake, a plough, or a tree) is presented to the reader as if it were a sentient being. The possibility should be entertained that the item in question is not a living creature at all, but rather something that is personified as if it were.

What the mysterious item is, I suggest, is an *island*. The simplest OE word for 'island' was *ig*, spelled in various ways (e.g. *ige*, *ieg*, *iege*) though always pronounced [iɛ]. This word, which in its various instances is normally feminine in gender but sometimes masculine,⁵⁰ is found fairly often in the extant records both as a freestanding noun and, compounded, in place-names such as *Sceapige* 'Sheppy', or 'sheep island'. The same word figures as the first simplex of the frequently attested neuter noun *ig-land*, also meaning 'island' and spelled various ways. Either *ie* or the masculine noun *igeop* 'islet' (variously spelled *igop*, *iggap*,

⁴⁹ This is not a new suggestion. For discussion, see Halsall, pp. 158–59, with reference to Joan Blomfield, 'Runes and the Gothic Alphabet', *Saga-Book of the Viking Society*, 12 (1941–42), 177–94, 209–31 (pp. 219–20). Compare Brooks's point about the *ȝr* rune-name cited in note 49 at p. 303 below.

⁵⁰ Bosworth and Toller, s.v. *ig*. In the main volume of that dictionary, the noun *ig* is said to be of feminine gender. In the *Supplement*, however, Toller notes that 'besides *ig* there seems to be a form *ige*' that he identifies as masculine. Moreover, Toller calls attention to instances of *ig* in the accusative case that are of indeterminate gender. The gender of this word (or word-complex) therefore seems to have been subject to some variation.

etc.) would satisfy the main condition that has to be met: that the *ie*-initial ‘creature’ be of amphibious nature. The simple noun *īg* is the most elegant solution to the puzzle, for the sound-value of the rune is exactly provided by the word that the rune signifies.

My proposed solution to the problem of the identity of the *†* rune is in accord with the principle (so often a feature of riddle solving as to be almost a law) that the item to be guessed is a commonplace one whose identity is disguised through some kind of exotic description. By definition, an island ‘lives’ immersed in water, while its upper parts extend above the high tide line. It can thus be likened to an amphibious creature. In Britain as in many other parts of the world, islands often provide good pasturage, and it is for that reason that the poet makes prominent reference to the provision of food on dry land. The verb *brūceþ* (87b) might at first seem a stumbling block to this interpretation, but only if that word is taken to mean ‘partakes of’, as if the ‘creature’ in question were partaking of food. Instead, what the phrase refers to is an island’s natural abundance of foodstuffs for foraging or grazing. The verb *brūceþ* here should be taken in the sense ‘possesses, enjoys the use of’ that that word sometimes bears in Anglo-Saxon charters, where it may denote seignorial rights (as in the formulaic phrase *habban and brūcan* ‘to have and possess’).⁵¹ So the island is rightly said to pertain to the realm of river-fish (for, as imagined here, it is surrounded by the fresh water of a lake, river, or river mouth), and yet it provides good pasture. Certainly the isle of stanza 28 of *The Rune Poem* is a happy one that, in an apt instance of personification, takes pleasure in its beautiful dwelling-place where it lives in delight.

As for the final stanza, it has baffled commentators who very much want there to be an OE word *ēar*, meaning ‘earth, grave’, to serve as the name of the *ŷ* rune, thereby providing weighty closure to *The Rune Poem* as a whole. The problem with that approach is no different from what we have seen with the supposed rune-names *peorð* and *īar*; namely, that no such word is attested in the corpus of Old English outside the rune lists.⁵² Like *īar*, *ēar* is probably no more

⁵¹ See the *DOE*, s.v. *brūcan*, sense 3, with its various subdivisions, esp. 3.a.i. ‘in charters: of usufruct’.

⁵² Note, however, Page’s attempt to defend the rune-name *īar* ‘earth, grave’ on the basis of possible Old Norse and Gothic cognates in his article ‘The Old English Rune *Ear*’, *MÆ*, 30 (1961), 65–79, repr. in his *Runes and Runic Inscriptions: Collected Essays* (Woodbridge, 1995), pp. 71–85. The linguistic evidence for this approach is highly technical. Even if he is correct and this was the original rune name, it seems unlikely that anyone in tenth-century England would

than a meaningless vocable. There do exist two homophonic nouns *ēar* in Old English, but what they denote are ‘ear (of grain)’ and ‘the sea’, senses that can be ruled out here. Similarly, though the noun *ēa* is commonly attested, what it means is ‘river’ or ‘large body of water’ (as in the compound noun *ēa-fixa* in stanza 28). *Ēa* meaning ‘river’, of course, is no more help in the context of stanza 29 than is *ēar* meaning ‘the sea’. So what else can the rune representing the word-initial sound *ea-* stand for?

Once again, I suggest that the rune speaks its own name. There is an *ea-*initial word in Old English that suits this passage well, and that is the common interjection *ēa* ‘alas!’ (the equivalent of Latin *heu*). In the great majority of instances this word appears in the compound form *ēa-lā* ‘alas!’ (or, sometimes, simply ‘indeed’). The exclamation *ēa-lā* is often used ‘in lamentations [or] expressions of grief, sorrow, [or] regret’ in the sense *oh! ah! alas!*⁵³ That sense of the word is exactly appropriate here, as it is towards the elegiac close of the Exeter Book poem known as *The Wanderer*, where it famously appears in three verses in succession.⁵⁴ In the Exeter Book poem *Christ I*, the exclamation *Ēa-lā* occurs as the initial word of eleven of the twelve lyric poems that constitute that work, and very likely the only reason it is lacking in the twelfth instance is that a page of that manuscript has been excised.⁵⁵ The same interjection is found with some frequency in initial position in the Old English poetic version of the psalms.⁵⁶ In the Old English version of the metres of Boethius, it figures (among other instances of its occurrence) at the beginning of three metres in succession, numbers 18, 19, and 20.⁵⁷ Altogether this commonplace interjection occurs no

have understood it. Like the *↑* rune and the *ōs*-rune, the rune could easily therefore have been reinterpreted. I am not convinced, however, that this rune ever had a meaningful conventional name.

⁵³ The *DOE*, s.v. *ēa-lā* interj., sense 2b.

⁵⁴ ‘Eala beorht bune! Eala byrnwiga! / Eala þeodnes þrym!’ (Alas, the bright beaker! Alas, the corsleted warrior! Alas, the majesty of the prince!). *The Wanderer* 94–95a, ed. by Krapp and Dobbie, p. 136.

⁵⁵ Note on this point *Anglo-Saxon Poetry*, ed. and trans. by Bradley, p. 204.

⁵⁶ The Paris Psalter, Psalms 79. 5 (*Eala ðu, mægena god*), 114. 5 (*Eala þu leofa god*), 115. 6 (*Eala, ic eom þin agen esne*), and 117. 23 (*Eala þu dryhten god*): *The Paris Psalter and the Meters of Boethius*, ed. by George Philip Krapp, ASPR, 5 (New York, 1932), pp. 46, 99, 100, and 103, respectively, with *ēa-lā* bearing the sense ‘indeed’ in each instance.

⁵⁷ Metre 18 (*Eala ðæt se yfla unrihta geded*), Metre 19 (*Eala, þæt is hefig dysig*), and, in the sense ‘indeed’, Metre 20 (*Eala, min drihten, þæt þu eart almihtig*): *The Paris Psalter and the Meters of Boethius*, ed. by Krapp, pp. 175–77.

fewer than fifty-one times in verse-initial and sentence-initial position in the Old English poetic records (once spelled *ēaw-lā*). Here in *The Rune Poem*, it introduces a verse sentence that provides fitting closure to the poem as whole. The gist of stanza 29 can be paraphrased, 'Alas! It will be a fearful thing for each and every person when the corpse begins to grow cold and all good things in life have fled'. Far from being a catalogue poem that merely perpetuates Old Germanic lore, *The Rune Poem* comes to a close with an eschatological cri de coeur that is typical of the rhetoric of the devotional poems of the later Anglo-Saxon period.

Readers of this chapter may rest assured that I do not claim that either *ēa!* or *ēa-lā!* is 'the name of the twenty-ninth Old English rune'. On the contrary, there was evidently no generally accepted name for that rune. What I am suggesting is that in the last stanza of *The Rune Poem*, the interjection *ēa!* or *ēa-lā!* provides the most satisfactory 'fit' of any Old English words that have the required initial sound, and so this solution to the problem of the meaning of that rune is not unreasonable. In response to the possible objection that 'runes must denote nouns, not other parts of speech',⁵⁸ I would reply: Who has set that rule? Is it modern scholars, with their principled notions as to what is permissible in runic hermeneutics? Or is it the Anglo-Saxon authors who play literary games with those phonetic and logophonic symbols? Is it such a person as Cynewulf, who three times uses the **U**-rune to stand for the possessive pronoun *ūre* 'our', among other liberties? Is it the highly inventive author of *The Rune Poem*, who elsewhere plays tricks with the grammatical forms of the **W**-rune and the **Y**-rune?⁵⁹ If there

⁵⁸ Ralph W. V. Elliott, 'Cynewulf's Runes in *Christ II* and *Elene*', *ES*, 34 (1953), 49–57, repr. in *Cynewulf: Basic Readings*, ed. by Bjork, pp. 281–91, makes casual reference to 'the fact that all rune-names are either nouns or proper names like Ing' (p. 284, my emphasis), thus confusing facts and assumptions.

⁵⁹ The eighth rune, **ƿ**, obviously stands for the feminine noun *wynn* 'joy'. To complicate things, however, the author of *The Rune Poem* employs that noun (as the object of *brūcan*) in the inflected genitive case *wynne*. Thus introduced to line 22 is a free-standing syllable, *ne*, that can easily be mistaken for the particle of negation. This is surely part of the poet's riddling strategy. As for the fifteenth rune **Y**, the received text is corrupt at this point and one can scarcely be sure what is intended. Accepting Halsall's reconstruction of line 41, **Y** is used together with the next word in the line, *secg*, to signify a compound noun, *eolhx-secg*, that denotes a type of marsh-grass that can cut one's hand. 'Creative compounding' is not what one expects to find in a rune-list, of course, and this may be yet another instance of linguistic deception. This unique construction seems to have fooled the scribe, for Hickes, probably following an erroneous manuscript reading, prints the nonsensical clause *eolhx seccard hæfþ* (see Figure 8). The fifteenth rune presents a special challenge to both author and reader in that the speech sound that it seems to have represented was the voiceless fricative [x]. Since that

is one point that I hope to have established in the course of the preceding pages, it is that modern preconceptions as to what a runic letter can or cannot mean have stood in the way of felicitous readings of a cluster of poems where runes are deployed in a riddling fashion.

Conclusion: On New and Old Assumptions

This chapter presents reasons for unnamning four of the runes of the Old English *Rune Poem* in the sense of relieving them of the 'textbook' names that are often attributed to them. Working from the hypothesis that those runes are best approached as initialisms, I have argued that two of them, **IE** and **EA**, literally speak their own names and can be construed as *īe* 'island' and as the interjection *ēa!* or *ēa-lā!* 'alas', respectively, while another rune that lacks a meaningful name, **P**, is used in an ad hoc manner to denote *pīpe* 'piping or fluting'. In addition, I have suggested a rune with a well-known conventional name, **B**, is used in a manner that could not be predicted on the basis of how it is used elsewhere. Here what it denotes is the noun *bōc*, meaning both 'beech tree' and 'book'. The poet's creativity in his handling of these runes is in keeping with what others (including Kemble, Trautmann, Halsall, Nicholson, and Osborn) have observed about his use of the *ōs*-rune and/or the *Týr/Tīw* rune and/or the **S**-rune in original ways to stand in for Latin *ōs* 'mouth', *Tiw* in the sense 'the planet Mars', and OE *segl* 'sail' hence 'ship', respectively.

While reviewing the passages in which these runes are embedded, I have shown new reasons to regard the author of *The Rune Poem* as a talented and inventive poet even if a distinctively mischievous one. In general, I have advocated reading the runes that are embedded in *The Rune Poem* in the same manner in which one must read most of the Exeter Book riddles: that is, by searching out a commonplace answer to a problem that seems to require an arcane solution.

Readers of this chapter and the ones that immediately precede and follow it will notice the prominence with which the term 'creative runography' appears. I use that phrase in two ways: first, to refer to the activities of certain poets of the Anglo-Saxon period who chose to play with the runes for special literary effects, and second, to refer to the hermeneutic strategy that modern readers must adopt if they hope to arrive at felicitous readings of the passages in question. In general,

phoneme does not occur in word-initial position in OE, the usual strategies of runic deployment and decipherment cannot apply.

I favour an approach to the problem of construing the runes that is in keeping with David Parson's characterization of the physical shapes of the runes in that same tradition. While presenting the case that there was an 'English standard' for the shapes of the runes, he also acknowledges that there was room within that standard for a good deal of creative variation:

I have repeatedly stressed that within this tradition there is innovation and variation. It seems to me probable, inevitable, that many aspects or facets of tradition would develop as runes were passed from person to person, area to area and generation to generation. Some [writers of runes] would be more learned, others less so; some prone to error, some happy to innovate.⁶⁰

If innovation is a feature of the carving or writing of runes, then one must wonder why comparable liberties should be denied to the poets who used the runes for literary purposes.

Since some cryptographic enigmas would surely escape the wisdom even of Saturn, who claimed to know all the alphabets of the ancient world,⁶¹ one should not be surprised that scholars have failed to agree on every point regarding the literary use of Old English runes. After all, not one person of the present era is in a position to declare what the authors of Anglo-Saxon England had in mind when composing *The Rune Poem* and other poems incorporating runes. All we can do is to make inferences from the texts, reading the exact words of those poems with scrupulous attention and drawing on whatever ancillary sources of insight can be enlisted. At most, what can be hoped for are strong likelihoods among competing possibilities: solutions that, once they are pointed out, seem elegant enough to provide the 'click' of hermeneutic satisfaction that attends a successful act of interpretation. It is my hope that at least some of the new readings offered in this chapter are found persuasive enough to find acceptance.

If my suggestions are rejected, however — whether my proposed new paradigm for reading the Old English *runica litteraria* is rejected categorically, or whether my local applications of that paradigm are not found, after all, 'to diffuse sweetness and light, to make reason and the will of God prevail',⁶² as Matthew Arnold expected works of cultured literacy to do — then it is worth contemplating the ground on which we are left standing. For all too frequently,

⁶⁰ Parsons, *Recasting the Runes*, p. 126.

⁶¹ *Solomon and Saturn I*, in *The Poetical Dialogues of Solomon and Saturn*, ed. by Robert J. Menner (New York, 1941), p. 80 (lines 1–4).

⁶² Matthew Arnold, 'Culture and its Enemies', in *Matthew Arnold: A Critical Edition of the Major Works*, ed. by Miriam Allott and Robert H. Super (Oxford, 1986), p. 363.

what scholars of the ‘fixed names’ school of thought have done is to engage in ‘creative runography’ of their own, but of an intolerable kind. Again and again, passages of Old English poetry have been rendered incoherent by being burdened with meanings that range from the doubtful to the absurd. Persons writing on *The Husband’s Message* have struggled to interpret that text via invented compound words like **sigel-rād* ‘sun-road’ and **ēar-wynn* ‘the joy of earth’ (or of the sea). Those writing on *The Rune Poem* have struggled to explain simplices like ?*ēar*, ?*īar*, and ?*peorð*, which have no attested meanings, by postulating the meanings ‘earth’, ‘eel’ (or, just as implausibly, ‘beaver’), and ‘table game’ or ‘chess piece’, respectively, and have tried their best to ignore the absurdity of the claim that birch trees bear no fruit. Those writing on Cynewulf (as we shall see) have asked us to believe that bows have mourned and have felt secret oppression, that torches have quaked with fear at the Lord’s voice, that wild oxes have trembled in anticipation of Doomsday, that flood-bound wealth will lie heavy with its burden of sorrow, and other oddities like these. This state of affairs has come to pass because of a false double assumption to which many persons still cling. These are the assumptions that each rune had a fixed name, and that poets composing in Old English were constrained to use each rune in that sense and in no other. It is hard to think of two preconceptions that have led to greater torture of these texts.

A BONUS SHIP

It may not be amiss to tally up what has been gained and lost through the preceding analysis of *The Rune Poem*. We have lost a supposed *table-game* or *chess piece*, a *birch tree*, a supposed *eel*, and a supposed *grave*. Since, however, none of the supposed Old English words for these things (with the exception of the birch) are anything other than phantoms of the scholarly imagination, those losses can be accepted without tears. What we have gained, on the other hand, is some pleasant *piping* or *fluting*, a good *book* to read as well as a sturdy *beech tree* to read it under, and a very happy *isle*, a veritable Innisfree of the Anglo-Saxon literary imagination if one wishes to view it thus. Set these things together and the picture is inviting enough. The exchange seems a fair one even if, *alas!*, the corpse will eventually cool and seek out the earth as its bedfellow. I have also taken sides with those who would trade the *sun* for a *sail*, or more precisely a ship with sails. Heliophiles may deplore what they will regard as a grossly unequal exchange, but I do not see how it can be undone, given the wording of stanza 16 of *The Rune Poem*. Another item to be tallied on the ‘gain’ side of the ledger is a *hawthorn hedge* or *whitethorn bush* where none had stood so clearly before. This item is free for anyone who thinks it worth taking. I cannot take credit for the *planet Mars*, which is a grand entry on the ‘gain’ side, for that solution (like the sail) has been advanced before. Perhaps the most important gain to have been made through these investigations is that we have come to have a closer acquaintance with the Rune-poet — an author who, though nameless and necessarily minor (since we know of him only through this one work), deserves admiration as one of the more ingenious literary craftsmen of this period.

In addition, I will propose one other new reading for *The Rune Poem* that will yield a lightweight military vessel at no cost whatsoever. Stanza 26 of the poem reads as follows:

ƿ biþ oferheah, eldum dyre,
 stiþ on stapule; stede rihte hylt,
 ðeah him feohtan on firas monige. (stanza 26, lines 81–83)¹

The accepted meaning of this stanza is as follows:

The ash is extremely tall, precious to mankind,
 strong on its base; it holds its ground as it should,
 although many men attack it.²

Since there can be no doubt that the correct rune-name here is *æsc* ‘the ash tree’ (*Fraxinus*), the third line of this passage is generally taken to present an image of men attacking a tree for some reason — so as to cut it down, one assumes.³ This sense is grammatically improbable, however, since an assault against the grammatically masculine ash tree would require the accusative pronoun *hine* rather than the dative construction *him* [. . .] *on*, a phrase that can only mean ‘in it’ or, conceivably, ‘in them’. Nor is it very likely, leaving Hollywood versions of Sherwood Forest aside, that a band of warriors would be fighting while perched in the midst of an ash tree or grove. The great valley oaks of California, with their low, contorted limbs, are more suitable for such photogenic exploits than are the straight-limbed ash trees of Europe. I therefore submit that the *æsc* in question is something other than a living tree, and that in line 83 the rune-name is used in riddling fashion, yet again, to refer to an object made out of wood.

As to the identity of that object, there are two possibilities. First of all, in Old English poetry the noun *æsc* ‘ash-wood’ is often used as a metaphor for ‘spear’, much as *linden* ‘linden-wood’ is used metaphorically to denote ‘shield’, since these were the favoured woods from which those two weapons were made. If one is willing to accept a shift in number from the singular noun *æsc* in 81a to the dative plural pronoun *him* in 83a, then what might be denoted is a small forest of spears. Taking the preposition *on* in the sense ‘among’, one could then interpret the line as meaning ‘even though many men fight amongst them’ — that is, among spears. While this is not an impossible reading, I wish to hold it up for contemplation rather than assent, for it still lies under some grammatical strain. An ideal reading would not require a shift to the plural number.

¹ Halsall, p. 92. As in the preceding chapter, I depart from Halsall’s editorial practice in that I give only the symbol of the rune, not its name, which is to be supplied by the reader.

² Halsall, p. 93.

³ Hall, ‘Perspective and Wordplay’, p. 457, takes this as a double image, seeing in it first a tree under attack (with ‘woodchoppers as enemies’) and then an ash spear standing firm against attack by a band of warriors.

A better way of making sense of the line is available, for the OE noun *æsc* also denotes ‘a light, swift ship, especially a Viking ship’.⁴ The rare use of *æsc* in this alternative sense is probably a Scandinavianism, for in the Old Icelandic tongue the cognate noun *askr* denotes, among other things, a particular type of light-weight warship.⁵ The word’s first appearance in English is in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* entry for the year 897. In that year the people of Essex were harried by a fleet of Viking raiders and King Alfred took special countermeasures: ‘Pa het Ælfred cyng timbran langscipu ongen ða æscas [. . .] swa him selfum ðuhte þæt hie nytwyrðoste beon meahten’⁶ (King Alfred then commanded longships to be built as a defence against the *askir*, just as he thought they might most usefully be built). Here the plural noun *æscas* denotes the light warships with which the Vikings of this period harried the coastline of Britain. It is because of the association of Viking raiders with warships of this type that one name for ‘sailor’ or ‘Viking’ in Old Icelandic is *ask-maðr*, literally ‘ship-man’. Similarly, an *aska-smiðr* ‘ash-smith’ is a shipwright, while an *aska-spillir* ‘spoiler who comes from a ship’ is a pirate.

If this approach to the word *æsc* is adopted, then what we are told about the **F** rune in stanza 26 of *The Rune Poem* can be translated as follows: ‘The ash is extremely tall, precious to mankind, strong on its base; it holds its place as it should, even though many men fight in it.’ In yet another example of a familiar paradox, an item is held up for contemplation in two different material forms corresponding to two stages in its life cycle. First we see it as a tree towering high and rooted firmly in the ground. Then we see it as a wooden vessel filled with fighting men. The ‘same’ thing (with the same name) both stands firm, as it should, and darts about doing its dirty work. So both a pun and a ship lie concealed in *The Rune Poem* where neither had been noticed before.

⁴ The *DOE*, s.v. *æsc*, sense 2. Compare B-T, s.v. *æsc*, sense IV: ‘a small ship, a skiff, a light vessel to sail or row in’.

⁵ Cleasby and Vigfusson, s.v. *askr*, sense 2.β: ‘a small ship, a bark (built of ash)’. For discussion of this word in both its Scandinavian and OE manifestations with reference to the OE compound noun *æsc-hera* ‘ship-borne raiders’ or ‘Viking host’, see Marijane Osborn, ‘Norse Ships at Maldon: The Cultural Context of *Æschere* in the Old English Poem *The Battle of Maldon*’, *NM*, 104 (2003), 261–80 (esp. at pp. 266 and 272–73). Osborn points out (among other things) that the *askr* was not in fact a ship built of ash; only its upper strakes were made from that wood.

⁶ *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, vol. III: *MS A*, ed. by Janet M. Bately (Cambridge, 1986), p. 60.

CYNEWULF'S USE OF INITIALISMS IN HIS RUNIC SIGNATURES

Cynewulf is famed as an author who never signed his name the same way twice. Each of his four runic signatures is unique, and each is uniquely ludic in the pressure it puts on his readers to decode it in a manner that fulfils the thematic promise of the poem in which it occurs.¹

I speak of Cynewulf addressing 'readers' rather than 'listeners' because of the likelihood that he was a literate person who wrote with a primary audience of other literate persons in mind. This does not mean that his poems could not have had auditors as well, whether among the clergy or the laity. In my opinion it is unnecessary, however, to assume that Cynewulf's runic signatures were composed first of all with the needs of listeners in mind. On the contrary, like

¹ For a succinct, up-to-date account of Cynewulf and his works, see Robert E. Bjork, 'Cynewulf', in *Medieval England*, pp. 227–29. The literary artistry of Cynewulf's signatures has been discussed in rewarding fashion by Dolores Warwick Frese, 'The Art of Cynewulf's Runic Signatures', in *Anglo-Saxon Poetry: Essays in Appreciation*, ed. by Lewis E. Nicholson and Dolores Warwick Frese (Notre Dame, IN, 1975), pp. 312–34, repr. in *Cynewulf: Basic Readings*, ed. by Robert E. Bjork (New York, 1996), pp. 323–45. Despite her emphasis on Cynewulf's literary artistry, Frese holds to the generally accepted opinion that each rune-name was 'surely a relatively fixed nominal commodity' (p. 313). In the notes to his exemplary edition *The Christ of Cynewulf* (Boston, MA, 1909), pp. 151–62, Albert S. Cook offers a detailed overview of Cynewulf's runic signatures, citing earlier solutions to the problem of the rune-names. Moritz Trautmann's chapter on Cynewulf's use of the runes in his study 'Kynewulf der Bischof und Dichter: Untersuchungen über seine Werke und sein Leben', *Bonner Beiträge zur Anglistik*, 1 (1898), 1–123 (at pp. 43–70), remains of value for its original insights. More recently Page, pp. 191–97, has made a judicious review of Cynewulf's strategies in his runic signatures. Since Page's book represents the best current wisdom about the nature and function of early English runes, I generally quote from his account before offering alternative views of my own.

the individual verse paragraphs of *The Rune Poem*, the passages in which he signed his name in runes seem conceived of as visual puzzles meant for a reader's eye. Whether one sees them in their original setting on the manuscript page or in modern editions, the runes are literally eye-catching, arresting. It is only after a rune (or a group of runes) is construed intelligibly with relation to the passage in which it occurs that the passage can be sounded out fluently for the benefit of listeners.²

In the two preceding chapters I have called attention to a number of instances where a rune or rune-like character embedded in an Old English literary text seems to be used in an ad hoc way, as an initialism for a word (to be supplied by the reader) that makes an apt fit in that context. The 'runic hermeneutics' that is in play at these small textual crises is very much like what one finds with the Exeter Book riddles, where an answer to a puzzle must be guessed on the basis of one's ability to discern the rhetoric of concealment for what it is. The difference between rune-play and other kinds of word games is that when a runic symbol is introduced into a text, it supplies a reliable aural pointer as to what kind of word will make for a felicitous 'solution', whether or not that word is a conventional rune-name.

Cynewulf's runic signatures can fruitfully be approached from a similar perspective, for creative runography of a similar kind comes into play there too from time to time. An analysis of how Cynewulf makes use of the runes in four of his poems will enhance one's respect for that poet's style as something neither slavishly traditional nor resolutely individualistic. On the other hand, an insistence on reading those runic signatures in doctrinaire fashion, 'by the book', will result

² I emphasize this point because a contrary assumption, that the runic passages were meant first of all to be heard by listeners, has led some distinguished scholars to rule out plausible interpretations of Cynewulf's runes on the grounds that listeners would not be aware that a runic signature was in progress. See Kenneth Sisam, 'Cynewulf and his Poetry', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 18 (1932), 303–31, repr. in his *Studies in the History of Old English Literature* (Oxford, 1953), pp. 1–28, at pp. 25–26, for an illustration of how an unnecessary assumption of this kind can close off options regarding how Cynewulf's cryptography is to be construed. My view of the lettered character of Cynewulf's signed works is in accord with that of S. A. J. Bradley, ed. and trans., *Anglo-Saxon Poetry* (London, 1982), p. 218: 'There is a natural plausibility in the idea that Cynewulf [. . .] composed in writing, not strictly orally, and relied upon a written text of his poetry to preserve the authorial form of it and thus to achieve that identity between a poet's name and the stable corpus of his works that the Latin poets were seen to enjoy'. Similarly, M. B. Parkes, 'Rædan, areccan, smeagan: How the Anglo-Saxons Read', *ASE*, 26 (1997), 1–22, emphasizes the evidence for the practice of silent reading during the early Middle Ages (at pp. 9–10).

in an imperfect grasp of what those famous passages contribute thematically to the poems in which they occur.

My personal attitude towards the canon of 'the Cynewulf poet' ought perhaps to be made clear.³ I cannot count myself an unreserved admirer of Cynewulf's talents when compared with those of certain other poets of the Anglo-Saxon period who are not graced, for us, with a name. These include the unknown authors of no few works discussed or mentioned in the previous chapters. This is largely a matter of personal taste, nothing more, though I believe that other persons have expressed a similar opinion. Still there are bright moments in all four of Cynewulf's signed works, each of which represents a novel contribution to the religious literature of the Anglo-Saxons. In their culminating passages, moreover, each of these poems affords its readers the pleasure that comes from two things that arrive concurrently. The first of these is a turn towards elegiac and sapiential rhetoric in the first-person singular voice. The second is a cryptographic challenge that is meant to be overcome. By introducing some 'fun' that is distinctly far from being 'funny', these cryptic passages provide their readers with an intellectual challenge while at the same time introducing the penitential terms in which these poems are to be understood at the level of individual spiritual commitment.

On the Possibility of Solar Clarity

The hardest defender of the two related notions that the runes had fixed names, and that Cynewulf and other Anglo-Saxon poets regularly used the runes in that sense and in no other, is Ralph W. V. Elliott in the course of three articles published over a span of thirty-eight years.⁴ As Elliott writes in characteristically

³ At pp. 309–10 below I suggest that the term 'the Cynewulf poet' might be preferable to 'Cynewulf' because it is less easily put to the service of autobiographical fantasies. When 'Cynewulf' speaks in 'his own voice', what one hears are conventional pieties phrased in the rhetoric of autobiography and personal aspiration. In this chapter, all the same, I will use the familiar name 'Cynewulf' for the sake of simplicity.

⁴ Ralph W. V. Elliott, 'Cynewulf's Runes in *Juliana* and *The Fates of the Apostles*', *ES*, 34 (1953), 193–204, repr. in *Cynewulf: Basic Readings*, ed. by Robert E. Bjork (New York, 1996), pp. 293–307; 'Cynewulf's Runes in *Christ II* and *Elene*', *ES*, 34 (1953), 49–57, repr. in *Cynewulf: Basic Readings*, ed. by Bjork, pp. 281–91; and 'Coming Back to Cynewulf', in Bammesberger, pp. 231–47. A somewhat more supple position regarding Cynewulf's use of the runes is adopted by Roger Lass, 'Cyn(e)wulf Revisited: The Problem of the Runic Signature', in *An Historic*

magisterial tones in the most recent of those studies, 'Certain principles of interpretation, which would have been obvious to Cynewulf contemporaries [*sic*], need to be established and observed. The most important is to give to each rune its name. We know from the Old English *Runic Poem* what these names are and what they mean.'⁵

Readers of the last chapter will be familiar with my own reluctance to embrace the last of these propositions, the one that concerns *The Rune Poem* and its value as a 'runic dictionary' (as opposed to its literary value). As for Elliott's main point, which concerns the need to interpret Cynewulf's runes 'by the book' (leaving aside for a moment the question of just how the contents of that 'book' are to be established), many other persons who have written on the Old English literary passages where runes are embedded seem to share a similar attitude, whether or not they announce it with as much bravado as this. Scholars of this persuasion naturally assume that Anglo-Saxon authors and scribes were more familiar with the names of the runes than we moderns are today. Frederick Tupper, Jr, has made a particularly imperious statement of this view: 'The man of the eighth and ninth centuries found sun-clear the symbols that have often beriddled the man of the nineteenth and twentieth.'⁶

Tupper's convictions regarding the 'sun-clear' character of the rune-names during the eighth- and ninth-century period when (as he further assumed) the poems of Cynewulf were composed have been undermined by Peter Orton's conclusions in a recent, closely argued book on the transmission of Old English verse. Orton finds that the scribes of Anglo-Saxon England often did not understand even their own language well, especially when dealing with vernacular verse texts, which employ an unusual syntax and vocabulary when compared with vernacular prose. Summing up the evidence he amasses in the course of his book, Orton writes: 'One of the major revelations of this study is the extent to which Anglo-Saxon scribes could be confused by the language of the texts they copied.'⁷ If Anglo-Saxon scribes, who were generally to be counted among the intelligent-

Tongue: Studies [. . .] Barbara Strong, ed. by Graham Nixon and John Honey (London, 1988), pp. 17–30. While assuming that each rune had 'a known and accepted meaning' (p. 21), Lass also accepts the likelihood that two runes (the U-rune and the C-rune) are used in an ad hoc manner. He does not try to resolve this apparent inconsistency.

⁵ Elliott, 'Coming Back to Cynewulf', p. 243.

⁶ Frederick Tupper, Jr, 'The Cynewulfian Runes of the Religious Poems', *MLN*, 26 (1912), 131–37 (p. 132).

⁷ Peter Orton, *The Transmission of Old English Poetry* (Turnhout, 2000), p. 196.

sia of their day, were given to misunderstanding even their own language when copying out verse texts, one wonders on what basis one can be confident that they had a sun-clear understanding of the meaning of the symbols of an antiquarian script that was not in everyday use. Doubts on this score apply with particular poignancy to the more out-of-the-way symbols such as the **P**-rune, the **IO**-rune, and the **EA**-rune. They ought to extend also to the **C**-rune, the **Y**-rune, and the **U**-rune that Cynewulf had no choice but to use when he set out to spell his name in *rīm-stafas*.

The question of an epistemological 'great divide' between the people of the Anglo-Saxon period and the people of our own era concerning the names of the runes has recently been launched into a postmodern space by Jacqueline A. Stodnick. Invoking the now-familiar axiom that 'criticism often reveals more about the nature of the critic than the text', Stodnick claims that the runes in Cynewulf's four signatures 'can now only be interpreted as they exist for the modern-day commentator: it is impossible to recover a sense of their initial significance for the Anglo-Saxon audience'.⁸ Stodnick's scepticism as regards the possibility of recovering the original sense of Cynewulf's use of the runes is symptomatic of a more general problem: how can a person living today recover a sense of the period-specific significance of *any* literary work pertaining to any early period of literary history? My own response to this general problem in literary hermeneutics has been set forth in chapter 1, where I propose an approach to the interpretation of Old English texts that involves satisfying four main criteria. These can be summed up under the names *philological exactitude*, *comprehensiveness*, *historical/contextual plausibility*, and *elegance*.⁹ Such an approach points the way towards a middle ground between the Scylla of old-fashioned positivism ('this is what the text meant') and the Charybdis of postmodern subjectivism ('this is what the text means to me, even though I have no basis for such a response').

More particularly, my approach to the signed poems of Cynewulf resembles the lexicographically based method that I have adopted when addressing certain problems relating to the riddles and the riddle-like elegies. On no few occasions, I have sought out the elements of a native Old English vocabulary that helps penetrate some mysteries that have resisted approach by other means. A person wishing to take a more radical stance in this regard could claim that a trained

⁸ Jacqueline A. Stodnick, 'Cynewulf as Author: Medieval Reality or Modern Myth?', *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library*, 79 (1997), 25–39 (quotations at p. 29 and p. 38, respectively).

⁹ See chapter 1 above, at pp. 26–31.

philologist today, using the lexical resources that are now available, may well be in a better position to ascertain the meaning of ‘problem’ Old English words and expressions than many native speakers of that language could have been; but I will leave that argument for others to make if they wish.

It will be convenient to turn first to the two Cynewulfian signatures that appear in the Exeter Book poems *Christ II* and *Juliana*, then to the two signatures included in the Vercelli Book poems *Elene* and *The Fates of the Apostles*.¹⁰

Christ II

As is well known, the passages in which Cynewulf signed his name (in the most literal sense of that phrase) make calculated use of runes both as individual letters, so as to spell out his name when transliterated into normal insular script, and (in three out of four instances) as signs standing for whole words, so as to provide a running text that satisfies the demands of metre and alliteration while also developing some eschatological reflections that reinforce the devotional message of these works. The names appear as CYNWULF in *Christ II* and *The Fates of the Apostles* and CYNEWULF in *Juliana* and *Elene* — an unregenerate act of inconsistency from the start.

The runic passage in *Christ II* begins with a passage of four-and-a-half lines in which the speaker looks forward fearfully to Judgement Day, when each and every person will have to face a final reckoning for his misdeeds:

Ðonne ƿonne ʰ cwacað, gehyreð cyning mæðlan,
 rodera ryhtend, sprecaŋ reþe word
 þam þe him ær in worulde wace hyrdon,
 þenden ʰ ond ʰ ypast meahtan
 frofre findan. (358–62a)¹¹

R. I. Page offers the following translation of those lines. It is a conservative one seeing that he prudently chooses not to assign semantic value to the three runes.

¹⁰ For a brief, informative account of the Vercelli Book, see either of Donald Scragg’s two articles on that topic in *Medieval England* and in *Blackwell Encyclopaedia*.

¹¹ Muir, I, 76. Here and elsewhere in this chapter, when quoting from this edition I present the runes as runes rather than transliterating them into their Roman equivalents, as is Muir’s practice. Muir’s title for this poem is *The Ascension*. The lines are numbered 797–801a in Krapp and Dobbie’s standard ASPR edition. Before the third rune, I supply a point that the scribe neglected to include.

Then *cen* will tremble, will hear the king pronounce, the ruler of the heavens speak angry words to those who had been feeble in obeying him in this world, while *yr* and *nyd* could find solace most easily.¹²

As Page recognizes, a reader who approaches this passage with only the conventional names of the runes in mind (as those names are inferred from other sources) will have great difficulty in construing it. One can easily perceive the gist of the message and pick out the first three letters of Cynewulf's name. Beyond that, trouble looms. It is possible, I suppose, to wring from this passage the meaning 'Then the TORCH will quake, it will hear the king speak, the ruler of the heavens, [it will hear him] address angry words to those who previously obeyed him irresolutely in the world, while the BOW and NECESSITY could find solace most easily.' On the other hand, why should a torch be trembling at Doomsday, what is a bow doing there, and what does it mean for need or necessity to find solace? Although attempts have been made to salvage one or another conventional rune-name here, such efforts impress one more by their audacity than their good sense.¹³ Another approach is called for.

One strongly suspects that what Cynewulf is doing in this passage is to challenge the reader to arrive at three words that begin with the required initial sounds [k], [y], and [n] and that also fulfill the demands of sense and metre. To begin with the first rune, what it can most plausibly be taken to stand for (as Kemble was the first to suggest)¹⁴ is the adjective *cēne*, here used substantively to denote 'the brave, the bold, the warlike'. Thus we are assured that 'the brave (or bold) will tremble' at Doomsday. Indeed, if the meek are to inherit the earth, then it is the bold who especially ought to fear damnation. As for the second and third runes, the words that they stand for function grammatically as the twin subjects of the verbal phrase *meahtan* [. . .] *findan*, which is used here (I suggest)

¹² Page, p. 194. Sisam, 'Cynewulf and his Poetry', at pp. 21–22, finds no meaning in these runes and proposes that they function only as letters spelling the name 'Cynewulf'. This view can be traced back to Benjamin Thorpe, John Mitchell Kemble, and other nineteenth-century scholars.

¹³ Here I refer particularly to Elliott, 'Cynewulf's Runes in *Christ II* and *Elene*'.

¹⁴ John M. Kemble, 'On Anglo-Saxon Runes', *Archaeologia*, 28 (1840), 327–72, repr. with additional notes and translations by Bill Griffiths, *Anglo-Saxon Runes* (Pinner, Middlesex, 1991), p. 59. So also Carleton Brown, 'The Autobiographical Element in the Cynewulfian Rune Passages', *Englische Studien*, 38 (1907), 205–06, and many other scholars, some of whom are noted by Muir, II, 410. *The Christ of Cynewulf*, ed. by Cook, pp. 161–63, includes nine different translations of this passage drawn from various sources going back to Kemble and Thorpe; all but one of these authorities accept one or another variant of the reading 'the bold (ones)'.

in the preterite subjunctive mood and is best translated ‘could have found’. Departing from earlier attempts to construe this passage, what I propose is that the two things that could have found solace or grace on earth but never did are *yfel* and *nīþ*, two words to be taken in the sense ‘moral evil’ (that is, ‘sin’) and ‘wickedness’, respectively.¹⁵ These two words sometimes occur in conjunction with one another in the homiletic literature of this period, as in an anonymous sermon included in Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Bodley 343 where assurance is given that the soul of a righteous person will be defended against the devil at the moment of death: ‘þa englas healdæþ heom wið his *yfel* and wið his *nīþes* grymnesse’¹⁶ (angels will guard him [or his spirit, the soul] against his [the devil’s] evil and against the ferocity of his malice). In the passage from *Christ II*, what Cynewulf is speaking of are not righteous Christians, but rather persons of an opposite character who, at the time of Judgement, will be found to have sinned against God or man. During their lifetimes they could have found grace through contrition and penance but were too obdurate to do so, and so when the trumpets sound announcing Doomsday the hour will be too late. This is the familiar homiletic message that is encoded in the first part of Cynewulf’s runic signature in *Christ II*.

Later in this same passage, the ‘correct’ name for the *ᚠ* rune, *ūr* ‘aurochs’ or ‘giant ox’, is disregarded for forgivable reasons. Breaking the rules of conventional runography, Cynewulf uses that rune to stand in for a common and convenient *u*-initial word, namely the first-person plural possessive pronoun *ūre* ‘our’:

Biþ se *ᚠ* scæcen
 eorþan frætwa. *ᚠ* wæs longe
ᚠ flodum belocen, lifwynna dæl,
ᚱ on foldan.¹⁷

Filling in the other runes in the usual way, these lines can thus plausibly be construed as follows: ‘The JOY (*wynn*) of earthly trappings has departed. OUR (*ūre*) portion of the joys of life, our GOODS (*feoh*) on earth, have long been locked in by the SEA (*lagu*) floods.’ Just what Cynewulf means by this reference to sea-

¹⁵ See Toller, s.v. *yfel*, n., sense I: ‘moral evil’; see also B-T, s.v. *nīþ*, sense IV: ‘evil, wickedness, malice’.

¹⁶ *Old English Homilies from MS Bodley 343*, ed. by Susan Irvine, EETS, 302 (London, 1993), sermon 5, lines 109–10 (p. 140).

¹⁷ Muir, I, 76, lines 365b–368a, corresponding to lines 804b–807a in the ASPR edition.

floods is, like all things, open to debate, but a fair inference is that he is alluding to the proverbial treacherous seas of life. This is a recurrent theme in his verse and one to which he turns directly in the concluding lines of this same poem, beginning with the verses 'Nu is þon gelicost swa we *on laguflode* / ofer cald wæter ceolum liðan'¹⁸ (Now it is very much as though we were traveling in ships on the sea, over cold waters).

My point here, however, concerns Cynewulf's creative use of the **U**-rune to stand for something other than its conventional name. In an attempt to salvage that name, Dolores Frese, accepting Elliott's approach to the runes, would have the sense of *ūr* 'wild ox' extended so far as to take on the meaning 'manly strength' in this passage.¹⁹ Page has made a pointed response to Elliott's efforts to stretch the word *ūr* on a semantic rack so as to make it yield this meaning: 'My own feeling is that if you can believe this you can believe anything.'²⁰ Rather than standing in for a noun that serves as the subject of the verbal phrase *wæs* [. . .] *belocen*, the **U**-rune can be intelligibly construed as standing in for the possessive pronoun *ūre* modifying the two apposed nominals *lifwynna dæl* and *feoh*, thus yielding the sense 'our portion of the joys of life, our goods (on earth)'. Understood thus, this passage from *Christ II* bears some resemblance in vocabulary and rhetoric to the prayer spoken by Azariah in King Nebuchadnezzar's furnace in lines 21–24 of the Old English poem on that biblical theme. Lamenting his and his companions' fall from good fortune, Azarias (as he is called in that poem, in which he serves as a stand-in for the clergy of the Christian era) regrets their having neglected their religious duties: 'Wæs *ure* lifgeond londa fela / fracuð ond gefræge'²¹ (Our manner of life, throughout many lands, was vile and infamous). Acknowledging his sins while speaking from the depths of a literal prison, Azarias utters a heartfelt prayer for God's forgiveness. The penitential and salvific mode of discourse that is developed here to good effect, in a poem that is recorded in the early part of the Exeter Book not long after *Christ II*, is very like what is seen in Cynewulf's runic signatures in *Christ II* as well as in his other signed poems.

¹⁸ Muir, I, 78, lines 411–12 (my italics), corresponding to lines 850–51 in the ASPR edition.

¹⁹ Frese, 'Art of Cynewulf's Runic Signatures', p. 332.

²⁰ Page, p. 192.

²¹ Muir, I, 158 (lines 23–24a). Muir titles this poem *The Canticles of the Three Youths*; it is generally known as *Azarias*. For useful information in brief, see *Medieval England*, s.v. 'Azariah', and *Blackwell Encyclopaedia*, s.v. 'Daniel'.

tremblingly await what he will determine as the reward for their life, in keeping with their deeds.' A meaning for the last two verses of the passage can perhaps be salvaged though it retains the quality of a tale told by an idiot: 'SEA WEALTH will tremble; anxious, it will sway.'

Faced with a plunge into madness in the midst of what is otherwise a sensible if not wholly inspired poem, readers are justified in rebelling against any rule of consistency that would require these runes to be read with their 'textbook' names. A different hermeneutic system must be invoked if one hopes to construe this passage intelligibly. Fortunately, an apt system can easily be discerned: the three clusters of runes are to be read as groups of letters standing for individual words. The three letters **CYN**, when taken as a group, represent the noun *cynn* 'the family, the race, the tribe': it is all of HUMANKIND who will cast about in grief at that dreadful day.²⁴ The next cluster of runes, **EWU**, presents a flash of Cynewulfian wit, for what they spell is the OE word *ewu* (also spelled *eowu*, *eow*, or *ewo*). This is another common OE noun, and what it means in the plural form that occurs here (with the plural verb *bīdað* 'they will await') is literally 'sheep', as in the word's modern reflex 'ewes'.²⁵ One does not have to be an

²⁴ Cf. the *DOE*, s.v. *cynn* (noun), senses 1 and 2, respectively; Trautmann, 'Kynewulf der Bischof und Dichter', p. 49. This is also the reading of Elliott, 'Cynewulf's Runes in *Juliana*', p. 300.

²⁵ Trautmann, 'Kynewulf der Bischof und Dichter', p. 49; Elliott, 'Cynewulf's Runes in *Juliana*', pp. 300–01; Elliott, 'Coming back to Cynewulf', p. 238. In *Cynewulf's Juliana*, rev. edn (Exeter, 1977), pp. 8–11, Rosemary Woolf (following Sisam, 'Cynewulf and his Poetry', p. 21) sees a problem with this solution in that in normal prose usage, *eowu* denotes 'female sheep', not 'sheep in general'. The objection is not a compelling one, however, given the freedom with which Old English poets use metaphor. In addition, there is a tendency for OE nouns to be emptied of some of their semantic value when used in poetry so as to serve the demands of the alliterative form. In the *DOE*, s.v. *eowu*, that word in the plural is accepted in this instance (though with a question mark) as denoting 'sheep' in general as opposed to sex-specific 'ewes'. In any event, Cynewulf was playing with the letters of his name; he could not very well find a *scīap* there. In her posthumously published essay 'Runes and Riddles in Anglo-Saxon England', in *'Lastworda Betst': Essays in Memory of Christine E. Fell*, ed. by Carole Hough and Kathryn A. Lowe (Donington, Lincolnshire, 2002), pp. 264–77 (at p. 277), Christine E. Fell accepts that the word **EWU** that is spelled out in runes stands for 'sheep' here. She goes on to suggest that there is yet more wit in this passage if Cynewulf was playing on the second element of his name, as if he were saying 'Look, you think I am the wolf kind but I am the sheep kind'. The enigmatic combination **LF** (to be pronounced, I assume, like Old Norse *ulf* 'wolf') would then stand for 'the wolf bit of my name', according to Fell. The ingenuity of this suggestion deserves accolades whether or not one is convinced that the passage involves a bilingual pun.

ingenious exegete to discern here, in the context of Doomsday, an allusion to the biblical parable of the sheep being separated from the goats (Matthew 25. 31–46)²⁶ or, if one prefer, to the commonplace pastoral image of human beings as sheep in the custody of the Good Shepherd.

So far we are on solid ground. There should be no great controversy about the interpretation of the first two clusters of runes, and we are now two-thirds of the way through spelling out the author's name. What happens in line 708, though, is a typically Cynewulfian reversal of expectations, for the runes $\Gamma \cdot \Psi \cdot$, transliterated as **LF**, do not spell out a word. Nor does it help to supply a vowel so as to expand those letters into a common noun such as *lif* 'life', *lof* 'praise, good reputation', or *lāf* 'remainder'. None of those words make good sense in this context, nor would the requirements of metre be fulfilled. So here, but here alone, we are invited to construe the letters as denoting a compound word based on the two word-initial letters **L** and **F** — a word formed in the same manner that *segl-rād* is formed in *The Husband's Message* on the basis of the two runes **S** and **R**. Since the compound noun **lagu-feoh* 'sea-riches' that some modern scholars would like to find here on the basis of the 'textbook' value of those runes is yet another nonce-word lacking linguistic authority,²⁷ and since, in addition, that imagined word is semantically unappealing (why would sea-riches tremble and sway in anticipation of Judgement?), a different solution is called for.

As Moritz Trautmann perceived many years ago (though his brilliant proposal has been largely neglected), by far the best reading here is the noun **LIC-FÆT**.²⁸ This word, which literally denotes 'the vessel of the body', serves as an obvious kenning for the body conceived of as a vessel for the soul. *Līc-fæt* has the attraction of being an attested Old English word.²⁹ It makes perfect sense in this

²⁶ This connection was made by Trautmann, 'Kynewulf der Bischof und Dichter', p. 49.

²⁷ The solution *lagu-feoh* was proposed by Tupper, 'Cynewulfian Runes', p. 136, and is supported by Elliott in his two studies 'Cynewulf's Runes in *Juliana*', pp. 299–303, and 'Coming Back to Cynewulf', pp. 236–37. Lass, 'Cyn(e)wulf Revisited', accepts this solution as well, interpreting the word as 'earth' (p. 23), as does Tupper. For further discussion, see Page, pp. 196–97.

²⁸ Trautmann, 'Kynewulf der Bischof und Dichter', p. 49. Brown, 'Autobiographical Element', p. 199, argues with some plausibility for yet another reading, *lagu-flōd* 'sea's flood' or simply 'ocean'. This is an attested OE word that occurs with some frequency in the poetry, including once elsewhere in Cynewulf's own verse (in *Christ II*, as is noted at p. 292 above).

²⁹ Although *lic-fæt* is a rare compound noun, it is not an unattested one, for it appears twice in the poem *Guthlac B*, also from the Exeter Book. What it refers to in verse 1090a of that poem is the body as what the saint's soul wishes to depart from in order to seek out eternal

context. What will quiver and sway with anxiety on Doomsday is of course the *body* or, by extension, the corpse, or simply the person with his or her body restored intact, trembling in anticipation of Judgement. The body will know itself to have been subject — understandably, to be sure — to the sins of the flesh, as it has been reminded in many a sermon as well as in the Old English poem known as *Soul and Body*, a poem that exists in two copies, one of them written out on fols 98^r–100^r of the Exeter Book and another on fols 101^v–103^v of the Vercelli Book. In this thematically related poem, which dwells with some satisfaction on the decay of a rotting corpse, ‘the damned soul castigates its body for its earthly sins and warns of Christ’s severity at Judgement’.³⁰ This passage from *Juliana*, similarly, reminds its readers of the day when all human beings, the pious and the wicked alike, will arise from their graves to face their Judge and redeemer. That is a day when the flesh will rightly quake with fear, in a phrase that is completely in keeping with the use of the verb *bifian* (here in the form *beofað*) elsewhere in Old English religious poetry to refer to the trembling of individual persons and, indeed, of the whole created universe on the day that is sometimes called *sē bifiende dōm* ‘the terrible [quaking] Judgement’ or *sē bifiende dōmes dæg* ‘the terrible [quaking] Judgement Day’.³¹

Elene and The Fates of the Apostles

The relevant passage in *Elene* begins with two sentences in which Cynewulf tells of his own prior state of mind during a troubled period before he gained a true knowledge of the Cross and its message of salvation:

A wæs secg oð ðæt
cnyssed cearwelnum, þr̥ drusende,
þeah he in medohealle maðmas þege,

joy. In verse 1369a the word is used with reference to Guthlac’s dead body as that saint’s *eorðan dæl* ‘portion of earth’ that lies in the grave, as opposed to his soul or *wuldres dæl* ‘portion of glory’ that seeks out redemption in God’s light. See *The Life of St Guthlac (B)* in Muir, I, 146 and 156, respectively, where the verses are numbered 272a and 551a, respectively. Compounds similar in construction (cf. *lic-brægl* ‘shroud’, *lic-pytt* ‘grave’, and *lic-tun* ‘graveyard’) are attested in Old English, as are compounds of the type *bān-fæt* and *eorþ-fæt*, two metaphors for ‘body’.

³⁰ Thomas N. Hall, ‘Soul and Body’, in *Blackwell Encyclopaedia*, pp. 425–26 (p. 425).

³¹ The *DOE*, s.v. *bifian*, sense A.1. ‘of persons, angels, or devils: to tremble, shake with fear’; sense A.3.a.i: ‘of the great perturbation at Judgement Day’; and, with relation to my last point, sense A.3.a.i.a: ‘with reference to the universal in perturbation on Doomsday’.

æplede gold. ᚠ· gnornode
 ᚠ· gefera, nearusorge dreaþ,
 enge rune. (1256b–61a)³²

Page offers the following translation of this admittedly difficult text:

Until then the man was continually tossed by the waves of care. He was like a flickering torch (*cen*), even though he received precious gifts of embossed gold in the mead-hall. *Yr*, his comrade at need (*nyd*), mourned, felt clamming sorrow, secret oppression.³³

Page accepts the first rune as standing for *cēn* in that word's accepted meaning 'torch'. He remains uncommitted as to how to take the second rune, for *yr* in this context cannot well have its conventional meaning 'bow'.³⁴ For the third rune, *nyd* 'necessity', he accepts the conventional name. Once again, however, Cynewulf is playing more freely with the runes and their meanings than might appear from this translation.

To begin with, there is no simile in the first Old English sentence. Page's translation 'he was *like* a flickering torch', with its simile, slightly misses the mark. If, reading this part more literally, one takes verse 1257b to mean that the man 'had been a flickering torch' even though he had received gifts in the hall, then the statement makes for a rather awkward metaphor. The 'flickering torch' interpretation of the passage has recently been defended by Thomas D. Hill, who points out that the comparison of a man to a torch or candle placed in the wind, or to a candle quickly lit and quickly put out, is well attested in early medieval Latin riddle and proverb tradition.³⁵ Hill is right that Cynewulf could have picked up such an image from this sapiential literature. If so, Cynewulf used some creativity while doing so, for he ignores the use of such a comparison in all other contexts cited by Hill (where it is *the life of man in general* that is likened to the brief or threatened light of a candle) and, instead, speaks of his own present security as a convert to the *via crucis* as compared with his earlier 'flickering' life before he had found the cross. This view of the passage is therefore plausible, and yet it remains under some strain. For those who are

³² *The Vercelli Book*, ed. by George Philip Krapp, ASPR, 2 (New York, 1932), p. 101; I supply pointing from the manuscript source.

³³ Page, p. 194.

³⁴ Nevertheless, Elliott attempts to salvage the 'bow' reading in 'Coming Back to Cynewulf', p. 242, where he stresses the martial imagery of *Elene* as a whole.

³⁵ Thomas D. Hill, 'The Failing Torch: The Old English *Elene*, 1256–1259', *N&Q*, n.s., 52 (2005), 155–60.

willing to entertain an alternative suggestion, I propose construing the lines in a different fashion.

Since what Cynewulf first says here is that 'the man [that is, he himself] had been continuously tossed by waves of care', the following verse is best taken as amplifying that statement. The **h** rune does not stand for *cēn* 'torch', but rather for the similar-sounding noun *cēnþu* 'courage, boldness, bold spirits'. What the verse means, I suggest, is 'his courage (*cēnþu*) had been faltering' (*drūsende*).³⁶ The verb *drūsian* occurs four other times in the Old English records, always in the poetry. In three of those instances it is used in the present participle form with semantic reference either to drooping spirits (*hyge*, a word that can mean 'courage') or to a faltering life.³⁷ Its use in that same manner and sense here is therefore thoroughly conventional.

As for the next rune **h**, only confusion will result from the assumption that it stands for a noun that serves as the subject (in apposition with the nominal phrase 'comrade in need') of the verb *gnornode*, taken in the sense 'mourned'. Creative solutions have been attempted along these lines, but they are not compelling, and Hill accepts that 'the normal meaning of the Yr rune, "bow", does not give good sense here, and no convincing solution of the difficulty has been proposed'.³⁸ A solution that differs radically from prior suggestions might therefore be entertained. What I suggest the **Y**-rune stands for here is the adverb *yfele*, to be understood in the sense 'grievously' that it bears in biblical and

³⁶ See the *DOE*, s.v. *drūsian*, esp. in sense c: 'to languish, falter, or droop'. The copula *wæs* should be understood as carried over from the preceding line. Other commentators going back to Kemble have interpreted the **C**-rune as used here as standing for the adjective *cēne* 'bold' used substantively, as in the phrase 'the bold one [was] sinking'.

³⁷ See the *DOE*, s.v. *drūsian*, for all these examples. For the use of *hyge* in the sense 'courage', see for example verse 203a of *Maxims I* (the Exeter Gnomes): *hyge [sceal] heardum men* 'a bold man must have courage' (Krapp and Dobbie, p. 163). Another, more famous example is found in lines 312–13 of *The Battle of Maldon*: 'Hige sceal þe heardra [. . .] þe ure mægen lytlað' (The firmer must our courage be [. . .] the more our force dwindles) (Dobbie, p. 15).

³⁸ Hill, 'Failing Torch', p. 156 n. 4. Éamonn Ó Carragáin, 'Cynewulf's Epilogue to *Elene* and the Tastes of the Vercelli Compiler: A Paradigm of Meditative Reading', in *Lexis and Texts in Early English*, ed. by Christian J. Kay and Louise M. Sylvester (Amsterdam, 2001), pp. 187–201 (at pp. 193–94), takes this rune to stand in for the noun *yrming*, normally spelled *irring*, which he glosses as 'the wretch'. He translates this passage 'The wretch (*yrming*) lamented. His necessary companion (*nied-gefera*; i.e., his body) endured crushing suffering, an oppressive secret' (my punctuation). While Ó Carragáin does not explain what leads him to adopt this translation, his interpretation of *njd-gefēra* as 'body' is a plausible alternative to the suggestion I make below.

homiletic contexts.³⁹ An example is the Old English version of Matthew 15. 22, where a woman whose daughter is *yfle mid deofle gedreht* 'grievously afflicted by the devil' calls out to the Saviour for help. After repeated entreaties, her prayer is fulfilled.⁴⁰ In like manner, Cynewulf declares that 'he had been lamenting grievously', in a statement that reinforces the penitential theme voiced in the preceding lines and that contains within it the hope that his lamentations will eventually prove to have been of good effect. Such a solution provides a more than satisfactory 'fit' with regard to both sense and sound. The objection might be raised, of course, that *yfele* is an adverb when what is required here is a noun; but rather than foregoing such an apt solution, we might more prudently retreat from the 'rule' that runes must stand for nouns.

The rune that follows, which has the standard name *nȳd* 'need, necessity', is best taken not as a simplex but rather as the first element of a compound noun, *nȳd-gefēra*. Although not attested elsewhere, this is a straightforward compound that in this context can be construed in the sense 'comrade or associate in or by need or necessity', or to give a more intelligible translation, 'one who is closely bound to others by ties of comradeship'.⁴¹ Three very similar compounds, each of them also unique, occur elsewhere in Old English poetry. These are *nȳd-gestealla*, which likewise denotes 'one who is closely bound to another by the ties of comradeship' (*Beowulf* 882b); *nȳd-genga* 'one who is forced to go' or 'one who goes in misery' (*Daniel* 632a); and *nȳd-fara* 'one who journeys under compulsion', hence 'fugitive, exile' (*Exodus* 208a).⁴² Drawing upon this formulaic system (with its overtones of journeying under compulsion), the speaker states that he has suffered grief and pain as one of a group of comrades closely bound to one another, perhaps as associates in a forced journey or journey of exile. What

³⁹ Bosworth and Toller, s.v. *yfele*, sense III: 'grievously' (used of hurt or suffering). Other commentators going back to Kemble have thought that the rune might stand for the noun *yfel* 'misery' in keeping with the assumption that rune-names must be substantives.

⁴⁰ *The Old English Version of the Gospels*, ed. by R. M. Liuzza, vol. 1, EETS, 304 (Oxford, 1994), p. 32.

⁴¹ P. O. E. Gradon, in her edition of *Elene* (London, 1958), glosses *nȳd-gefēra* as 'inevitable companion' without explaining what she takes that phrase to mean.

⁴² Other similar nouns that occur in prose are the probable basis of this formulaic system. See B-T, s.v. *nīd-frēond* 'one closely connected by relationship or friendship', *nīd-mæg* 'a near kinsman, a cousin', *nīd-māge* 'a near kinswoman, a cousin', *nīd-pēow* 'a slave, thrall', and *nīd-pēowetling* 'one who is forced into slavery'. The fourth of these nouns (in the variant form *nīd-pīow*) also occurs in verse 361a of *Christ I* with reference to the 'slaves of God' (Lat. *famuli Christi*), that is, the clergy.

Cynewulf is referring to could be his former situation as one of a band of thegns in the mead-hall. With greater likelihood, in my opinion, the phrase can be taken as an allusion to his identity as a Christian penitant engaged in the *pèlerinage de la vie humaine*, perhaps specifically as one of a group of cloistered monks. The members of either a secular or a spiritual *gedryht* 'band of comrades' were bound to one another by oaths of service as well as by ties of reciprocity, so that either group could be denoted here. What is important to observe is that the lines present a commonplace devotional theme. Cynewulf is not making the inscrutable claim that '*ȝr*' (whatever *ȝr* is construed to be) has been his close companion. Rather, he is stating that 'as a *nȝd-gefēra*, he had been grievously lamenting'. Such grief requires no explanation, for *pēowas Cristi* 'servants of Christ' were expected to suffer mortification of the flesh as well as tribulation of the spirit while engaged in the penitential discipline that was their vocation.⁴³

As a whole, this part of the signature passage from *Elene* can therefore be translated as follows, adapting Page's translation in the light of the preceding discussion:

Until then the man had been continually tossed by waves of care. His COURAGE had been faltering, even though he had received precious gifts of embossed gold in the mead-hall. As a NEED-companion, he had been GRIEVOUSLY lamenting, had felt clamming sorrow, secret oppression.

The strong impression left by this passage, when read with reference to the devotional tenor of the poem as a whole, is that what released the speaker from his grief and anxiety was his discovery of the meaning of the true cross — an event that can also be taken to signify his full entry into the religious life.⁴⁴ Although the passage presents just as rigorous an intellectual challenge as do Cynewulf's other runic signatures, the lines can be construed coherently. To avoid ruining the sense of the passage through slavish fidelity to the textbook names of the runes, the reader must search for phonetically suitable words that, while spelling out Cynewulf's name and referring to his spiritual vocation, also reinforce his

⁴³ The locus classicus for this idea in the poetry of the Exeter Book is *The Seafarer*, according to Dorothy Whitelock's convincing interpretation of that poem as set forth in her article 'The Interpretation of *The Seafarer*', in *The Early Cultures of Northwest Europe*, ed. by Cyril Fox and Bruce Dickins (Cambridge, 1950), pp. 259–72.

⁴⁴ Brown, 'Autobiographical Element', pp. 203–05, offers a different interpretation of these lines based on his acceptance of MS *sæcc* 'strife' rather than editorial *secg* 'man' in verse 1256b. He takes the passage to mean that there was always strife in the world until the coming of the Cross. With Page and others, I favour the emendation.

main theme in this poem. That theme is the role of the cross and, by extension, the crucifixion of Jesus in the redemption of humankind.

This analysis of Cynewulf's use of the runes in his coded signatures can be concluded with a glance at his practice in lines 96–106 of *The Fates of the Apostles*. The only point of contention here has to do with verses 103–05a:

Ðonne ᚠ ond ᚷ cræftes neosað
nihtes nearowe, on him ᚠ ligeð,
cyninges þeodom.⁴⁵

Page, who accepts the standard rune-names *cēn* 'torch', *ȝr* 'bow', and *nȝd* 'necessity' at this point, translates this clause (with some hesitation): 'While *cen*, torch, and *ȝr*, ?bow, carry out their office in the closeness of the night, *nyd*, the king's service, lies upon them.'⁴⁶ He does not attempt to specify what the nocturnal offices of the torch and bow are supposed to be, nor does he speculate as to what this imagery may signify in a wider sense. Elliott accepts the readings *cēn* 'torch' and *ȝr* 'bow' in the first of these verses, but his attempt to make sense of the passage is complicated by his mistaking the present-tense verbs *nēosað* and *ligeð* as preterites. He thus offers the following mistranslation of the first two of these lines: 'In the narrow watches of the night, / while torch and weapon were used, / hardship oppressed them [the apostles].'⁴⁷ Once this grammatical error is corrected, the apostles cannot well be the objects of the verb *nēosað*, and it is hard to see what these lines are intended to mean. Dolores Frese speaks of 'the plight of the Torch and Bow' being constrained in 'the narrows of the night' as 'a particularly imprisoning image' that contributes to the complex literary qualities of this passage,⁴⁸ but I find it hard to share her empathy for the plight of these items. Slightly more contagious is her enthusiasm for the 'interesting word link' that she sees connecting this passage with that earlier part of *The Fates of the Apostles* where mention is made of the *nearwe searwe* 'oppressive skill' (13b) of the Emperor Nero, the persecutor of the apostles Peter and Paul. The link here, however — the resemblance of the noun *nearowe* in 104a to the adjective *nearwe* in 13b — does not leap to the forefront of one's attention seeing that ninety lines

⁴⁵ *The Vercelli Book*, ed. by Krapp, p. 54 (with pointing supplied from the manuscript source).

⁴⁶ Page, p. 192.

⁴⁷ Elliott, 'Coming Back to Cynewulf', p. 245.

⁴⁸ Frese, 'Art of Cynewulf's Runic Signatures', p. 323.

of a different character intervene, while the topic under discussion has changed from Roman history to the speaker's spiritual needs.

I suggest that the sense of this passage is revealed when the first two embedded runes are read as initialisms and are taken to signify not their customary names *cēn* 'torch' and *ȝr* 'bow', respectively, but rather the two antonyms *cēnþu* 'boldness' and *irgþ* or *irgþu* 'cowardice'. Although this latter noun is entered in Bosworth and Toller with an initial *i*, it is actually spelled most often with an initial *y* and so it fulfils the orthographic conditions that are to be met at this point.⁴⁹ The sense of the two verses is thus, 'While BOLDNESS and COWARDICE (that is, while the brave and the craven) carry out their office in the closeness of the night . . .'. What I take the author to be alluding to here are members of the clergy who carry out God's commands either zealously or, all too often, with a failure of nerve.⁵⁰ The **C**-runes are used in *Elene* in this same way.

The noun *cēnþu* that is to be inferred in both these signature passages from the Vercelli Book is used in *Beowulf* at that crucial moment of the dragon fight when Wiglaf, distinguishing himself from the craven Geatish warriors who have fled for safety, determines to advance to his king's side: 'Ða ic æt þearfe [gefrægn] þeodcyniges / andlongne eorl ellen cyðan, / cræft ond *cendū*' (Then, I have heard, the king's loyal retainer made known his courage, strength, and bravery, 2694–96a). In the passage from *The Fates of the Apostles*, as throughout Cynewulf's verse, the language of heroic poetry is converted into that of hagiography. The courage to which allusion is made is that of spiritual warriors — here, the apostles; in *Elene* the speaker himself — who have devoted themselves to the service of Christ the King (*cyniges þeodum*, 105a) in the manner of thegns who faithfully serve an earthly lord. As for the noun *irgþ(u)* or *yrgrþ(u)* in its various spellings, it is found with some frequency in the devotional literature of Anglo-Saxon England, sometimes with reference to servants of Christ who are timid or slack in fulfilling their duties. The word has this sense in chapter 26 of the Old

⁴⁹ A search of the Corpus of Old English shows twelve instances of initial *y*, only one of initial *i*, and one of initial *ie*.

⁵⁰ Some license to interpret the **Y**-runes as freely as this is offered by Kenneth R. Brooks in his edition *Andreas and The Fates of the Apostles* (Oxford, 1961). As Brooks writes: 'It is at least doubtful whether the rune-name *ȝr* had any specific meaning. The sound it represented was a comparatively late development, being the front mutation of *u*; as the name *ūr* existed for the **U**-runes, the name *ȝr* may have been simply a mechanical formation like the **Y**-runes itself, which consisted of the **U**-runes with a subscript **I**-runes joined to it' (p. 126, n. to line 103). David N. Parsons, *Recasting the Runes: The Reform of the Anglo-Saxon Futhorc* (Uppsala, 1999), p. 35, n. 28, accepts the gist of Brooks's argument. Page, p. 45, finds the name *ȝr* 'arbitrary'.

English translation of the Benedictine Rule, where the author of the Rule urges monks not to fear — ‘ne þurh *yrhðe* ðinre hæle weg ne forlæt’, ‘nor should you abandon your sound path through cowardice’ — despite the rigour of certain provisions of the Rule.⁵¹ In the version of the ‘Sermo Lupi ad Anglos’ that is preserved in CCCC, MS 201, the homilist and lawmaker Wulfstan excoriates his fellow members of the clergy for their many faults, including that of cowardice. The manifold evils of his era have come about in part, he declaims, ‘þurh lyðre *yrhðe* Godes bydela þe soþes geswugedan ealles to gelome ond clumedan mid ceaflum þær hy scoldan clypian’⁵² (through the lax timidity of God’s messengers [that is, of preachers] who, all too frequently, have failed to speak the truth and have sealed their lips when they should have called out aloud). No torches or bows are required for one to understand this part of Wulfstan’s sermon, and neither are they needed for a felicitous understanding of the concluding part of Cynewulf’s poem on the martyrdom of the apostles, those heroes of Christ.

Conclusion: Start Making Sense

My analysis of how Cynewulf deploys one or another individual rune in his four signed poems can be questioned at many points. If *līc-fet* has its advocates as the best way to construe the L-F pairing in *Juliana*, for example, *lagu-flōd* has had its partisans as well. One can easily imagine a future scholar mounting a clever argument for *lēoht-fet* ‘lamp, lantern’ on the basis of the teachings of Jesus regarding lanterns and bushel baskets (Matthew 5. 15), the lamps of the wise and foolish virgins (Matthew 25. 1–13), or other biblical passages featuring incandescent imagery. Just as a riddle can have more than one plausible solution, more than one way can be found of persuading these admittedly difficult passages to give up the ghost of a meaning. In like manner, when discussing the runes that are embedded in *The Husband’s Message*, I have commented on the difficulty of arriving at a single reading that will command universal assent.

What I am arguing for with conviction, however, is a mode of interpretation rather than any one specific application of it. This is the principle that *there exists no list of ‘correct’ rune-names that one can consult to decode Cynewulf’s signatures*.

⁵¹ Arnold Schröer, *Die angelsächsischen Prosabearbeitungen der Benediktinerregel*, Bibliothek der angelsächsischen Prosa, 2 (Kassel, 1885–88), pp. 1–133, repr. with appendix by Helmut Gneuss (Darmstadt, 1964), p. 5.

⁵² Dorothy Bethurum, *The Homilies of Wulfstan* (Oxford, 1957), p. 274, lines 182–84.

On the contrary, anyone who sets out to construe these cryptic passages has to proceed inferentially, reading each and every word and phrase with care. Knowledge of the conventional rune-names is indeed often required, and sometimes no more than that is needed to yield sufficient sense; but the conventional name does not lead to a tolerable result in every instance. What is always relevant and useful is one's knowledge of the phonetic value of the runes — this and some ingenuity in solving word-games. Attention to Cynewulf's devotional purposes in these poems is another *sine qua non*, for that author would surely have felt defeated if he had thought that any of his readers would lose track of his message of redemption for the sake of chasing a torch into sea-riches.

One incidental point worth keeping in mind regarding Cynewulf's four runic signatures is that in none of them is the U-rune used in its older Germanic sense of 'aurochs, wild ox', the sense that it bears in the Old English *Rune Poem* (though only there in the corpus of Old English). Rather, either Cynewulf employs that symbol as a grapheme standing for the vowel *u*, as in *Juliana*, or else, three separate times, he has it stand in for the possessive pronoun *ūre* 'our'.⁵³ Thus he speaks in *Christ II* of 'our' lost portion of life's delights (lines 366b–67, in Muir's numeration), in *Elene* of 'our' fleeting radiance of youth (verses 1265b–66a), and in *The Fates of the Apostles* of 'our' joy in the homeland, which is soon destined to perish (verses 100b–01a). It is safe to say that for Cynewulf, although not necessarily for any other Anglo-Saxon author,⁵⁴ 'the name' of the *Ū* rune is the word *ūre*. This word is not a noun, of course; it is a possessive pronoun. Cynewulf's practice in this regard contradicts the assumption that rune-names must be nouns.⁵⁵ That principle must therefore be regarded as a rule to which there are exceptions.

To return to my main point, Cynewulf's runic signatures are indeed, as has been argued by discerning critics, best understood as integral parts of the poems

⁵³ For further discussion, see Page, pp. 191–95. Page accepts the reading of *Ū* as 'our' but not the reading of *h* as *cēne* 'bold', and so he leaves that latter symbol untranslated, as is his custom when he sees no clear sense in the use of a rune.

⁵⁴ The person who ascribed names to the rune-list included in London, British Library, Cotton MSS, Domitian A IX, however, glossed this rune as Lat. *noster*. Either that scribe was familiar with Cynewulf's practice in one or more of his runic signatures, or he independently equated the sound of the U-rune with the English possessive pronoun *ūre*.

⁵⁵ Trautmann, 'Kynewulf der Bischof und Dichter', p. 46, states this position categorically, arguing with characteristic but unnecessary vigour against the position that Cynewulf's runes can stand for parts of speech other than nouns.

into which they are woven. Leaving aside as a special case the use of runes solely as letters in two instances in *Juliana*, modern editors who wish to put their readers in a strong position to construe these passages intelligibly could do worse than to use square brackets to give warning that the embedded runes serve as initialisms. The passage from *Christ II* that was my point of departure in this chapter, for example, could helpfully be edited like this:

ƿonne ʰ [c—] cwacað, gehyreð cyning mæðlan,
 rodera ryhtend, sprecan reþe word
 þam þe him ær in worulde wace hyrdon,
 þenden ʱ [ɣ—] ond ʰ [n—] yþast meahtan
 frofre findan. (358–62a)

When searching for the best way to fill in the blanks in a passage edited in this manner, one's first recourse is to look to the conventional names of the runes. Most often that will solve the problem right there. If such a procedure results in nonsense, however, then some other method must be found. In such instances, the most sensible hermeneutic strategy is to infer a set of words, beginning with the requisite sounds, that completes the sense of the passage in accord with the author's devotional message, as expressed in this passage as in the poem as a whole:

Then the BOLD (*cēne*) will tremble; they will hear the King speak, the ruler of the heavens; they will hear him utter angry words to those who obeyed him only feebly before in this world, when SIN (*ɣfel*) and WICKEDNESS (*nīþ*) might most easily have found grace.

There is nothing scandalous about interpreting Cynewulf's signatures in this way. No 'laws' laid down by rune masters of the Anglo-Saxon period are broken. The hermeneutic strategy adopted here is consistent with the wide variety of methods that must be brought into play if one hopes to crack the cryptographic puzzles that are a prominent feature of the Old English poetic corpus. Moreover, to construe Cynewulf's runic signatures in this way is to read them in a manner that preserves the integrity of what that author has left us: four devotional poems, each one of which reveals a strong literary intelligence animated by religious zeal.

ON THE DANCE OF WIT AND WISDOM

As this book has progressed from a consideration of the riddles of the Exeter Book to the analysis of riddle-like poetry that is preserved in that same anthology or elsewhere in the Old English records, it has dealt with texts of a variety of kinds. No need has been felt to divide them out into rigorously defined generic categories. If there is a category other than 'short poem' or 'short poetic passage' into which works of such various character as the riddles of the Exeter Book, *The Wife's Lament*, *The Husband's Message*, *The Rune Poem*, and Cynewulf's runic signatures comfortably fit, it is that of 'enigmatic poetry'. While I find that category useful for certain practical purposes (such as deciding upon a title that will yield reasonably accurate information regarding the contents of a book), I do not wish to argue that it can withstand serious scrutiny.

My less than wholehearted commitment to that term stems from the consideration that almost any satisfying short poem from almost any time and place is also, to some extent, an enigmatic one. Indeed, it is through the self-conscious cultivation of such potentially mystifying devices as metaphor, personification, paronomasia, the strategic display of silence, and the use of the first-person singular voice (when that 'first person' is not actually reducible to any individual 'me') that poetry of the more lyrical kind is distinguishable from other uses of language. And this has been one of my guideposts and leading themes: that when one writes about the riddles and riddle-like poems composed in Old English, what one is finally talking about is Old English poetry itself as a mode of expression. From there it is only a short step to the aesthetics of poetry in general.

So it seems to me almost as fruitless to trumpet 'enigmatic poetry' as a generic category as it is to make a case for 'wisdom literature' as a term with significant explanatory power. While that latter term has been in circulation long enough to merit the dignity that age confers, it too is of greater appeal from a practical

perspective than from a theoretical one.¹ Surely many works of literature embody wisdom, from the Bible to the short stories of Flannery O'Connor. The question is, what works do not — and why bother with them? In like manner, what poems worth reading are not, in one way or another, enigmatic?

If there is a difference between the verse that is singled out for attention in this book and the remaining corpus of Old English poetry, it is one of degree rather than kind. Chiefly that difference has to do with the extent to which a poem has an actual 'solution' to its chief mystery. The 'onion' riddle has the answer 'onion', for example. The chief hermeneutic problem of *The Husband's Message* is resolved (I have claimed) when one realizes that the imagined speaker of that monologue is neither a person nor a personified rune-stave, but rather the rune-inscribed mast of a ship. Still, no one would want to put much weight on the notion that some poems have 'solutions' while others do not. Some riddles of the Exeter Book have yet to gain a consensus solution. Many of them can be read perfectly well in several different ways, as anyone will know who has studied the critical literature on that genre or who rebels against one or another of the answers for which I have put in a favourable word. After all, polysemy is not a feature unique to those riddles with a sexual double entendre; it is a *sine qua non* of riddling in general, and it is something that turns real-life oral riddling sessions into far more lively events than they might otherwise be. Moreover, even though much of my discussion of the riddles has been oriented towards their solutions, I have emphasized that finding the solution to a riddling text is scarcely the end of the experience of reading it. Indeed, if a riddle were an orchestral piece, then hitting upon its solution would be more like finishing its prelude than hearing the suite itself.

¹ Reference to this category is made in passing at pp. 48–49, note 118, and p. 109 above. When referring to 'wisdom literature' I have uppermost in mind the biblically influenced critical writings of Morton Bloomfield, including his study 'Understanding Old English Poetry', *Annuaire Mediaevale*, 9 (1968), 5–25, repr. in his *Essays and Explorations: Studies in Ideas, Language, and Literature* (Cambridge, MA, 1970), pp. 59–80. The term 'wisdom literature' is also used to good effect by T. A. Shippey in his survey *Old English Verse* (London, 1972) as well as in his anthology *Poems of Wisdom and Learning in Old English* (Cambridge, 1976). Fulk and Cain include a chapter on 'Wisdom Literature and Lyric Poetry' in their recent history of Old English literature (at pp. 164–92) as a means of talking about virtually all Old English poetry that is neither overtly heroic nor overtly Christian in content. In the pragmatic spirit that typifies this volume, they do not try to define either 'wisdom literature' or 'lyric poetry' other than through a series of examples. For additional discussion, with references, see Russell Poole's weighty annotated bibliography *Old English Wisdom Poetry* (Cambridge, 1998).

The same observation holds even more true of the elegiac poems of the Exeter Book. As examples of what might be called 'lyric narrative' they have no 'solutions', nor were they ever meant to have. Instead, they put on display certain imagined actors (or voices) who are embroiled in certain imagined circumstances. It is up to the members of the audience to infer who these people are, what their stories have been, what makes the speaker 'sing', what may ensue after the poem stops, and what wisdom one can gain by reading these things. Even more than the Exeter Book riddles, the lyric narratives of the Exeter Book seem to be designed as 'talking points' rather than as texts whose meaning sits upon them like a label.

Because of their reflective nature and their gnomic or homiletic content, *The Rune Poem* and Cynewulf's runic signatures seem to me to reside somewhere in the middle range of an aesthetic scale that runs from literary parlour tricks, on one end of the scale, to 'pure poetry' like that of the French Symbolists on the other. These dense textual passages are meant to give pause. Some of them at least are intended to inspire reflection, both about the cryptographic strategies they employ and about the intellectual substance they contain. I have suggested that both *The Rune Poem* and the Cynewulfian signatures call for unique strategies of decipherment, so that the struggle of 'solving' these texts is a real one and, indeed, not one that can ever be firmly concluded.

As for the intellectual substance of these works, it is typical of the thinking of this period. That is precisely where its importance lies: in the realm of mentalities, of collective thought rather than solipsistic meditation. 'The thorn (that is, the thorn tree or hedge) is sharp; anyone who lies down there will regret it', says the Rune-poet, telling his readers what they know perfectly well already. 'Generosity [*gyfu*] is a grace in men of position, [. . .] and for all the dispossessed it is a help and a means of survival',² says the same poet, reminding those same readers what they may, in fact, need to be reminded of. 'Then the bold (*cēne*) will tremble', the Cynewulf poet tells his readers, thereby encouraging them in his usual pastoral fashion to concentrate their thoughts on that awful day when arrogance will be etched from the soul as surely as flesh is etched from the bone. We tend to speak of 'Cynewulf' as if he were a flesh-and-blood person for the sole reason that we know his name, but in that regard he has tricked us through the device of authorial personification. It would be wiser if we spoke of the author of the poems in which the CYNWULF or CYNEWULF runes are embedded

² I quote Halsall's discriminating translation of this verse passage (p. 87).

as 'the Cynewulf poet', just as we may speak of 'the Rune-poet' or 'the *Beowulf* poet' without pursuing the question of individual identity any farther, for then we would not so obviously risk mistaking for flesh-and-blood reality what is really no more than a rhetorical effect.

'Enigmatic poetry' and 'wisdom literature' have a natural affinity for one another, for it often happens that the pleasure of reading poetry of this kind derives from the shock of recognizing the knowledge that one has always had. The interplay of these two related categories of 'wit and wisdom', in their ceaseless minuet, has been the topic of this book. It is a book that addresses certain individual poems, the play of their texts, and the delight they may provoke on the part of their readers as a kind of microcosm of the experience of reading Old English poetry in general.

INDEX OF OLD ENGLISH WORDS AND PHRASES DISCUSSED

- ænlīc 16, 23
æsc 35, 107–8, 282–3
ābæd 66–7, 68, 70 n. 35
ā-biddan 66–7
āc 36
ā-gēotan 133 n. 75
amānsumian 178
ān 97 n. 32
- bāt 35–6
‘bē gehwīlcum þīngum’ 58
‘be wege’ 93–4
bēam 33 n. 64, 64–5, 130 n. 64, 230–2
bend 138
bēor 111
bifian 297
*blæst-pīpe 108
blēd, blǣd 271 n. 46
bōc 35, 135–6, 269–71
bord 33 n. 64
brim-hengest 147 n. 18
brūcan 274
burgum, dat. pl. of beorh, 133 n. 74
- candel 94
cēnþu 303
cēol 229, 233
cēol-þel 229, 233
cursian 178
- cwedol 179 n. 84, 182
cwene 15–17, 15 n. 17
cynn 64, 295
- drūsian 299
- ēa 240
ēa-lā 275–6
ēar 236 n. 54, 274–5, 279
englisc 57
eorð-scræf 152 n. 7
ewu 295
- fæhðu 162–4
fæmne 17
feax-hār 19 n. 31, 33–34
‘fēower cynna’ 64
ferð 17–18, 43
feþer 126
folde 115
‘for eorlum’ 65
frēa 234 n. 49
‘freondscype fremman’ 227
fyrd-wæn 77–8
- galga, gealga 71, 73, 81
- hæfde 16, 38 n. 84, 43
‘hæfde ferð cwicu’ 31, 43

hago-steald 138

hār 33–4

hengen 73–5, 81

herh-eard 152 n. 7

hlāford 153, 234 n. 49

hlin 66

horn 132–3

hrēod 131–2, 267

*ialh 68

īar 272–4, 279

īg 273–4

īs-mere 113

*lagu-feoh 296

lēac 146 n. 9

lēaf 270

lēod-fruma 153

līc-fæt 296–7

‘lytle wihte’ 129

mann, monn 158, 199

meldan 115 n. 27

micel 58

‘mīnes felaleofan fæhðu’ 163–4

mund 196–7

nīþ 292

nȳd-gefēra 300–1

‘on āne tīd’ 17, 38–9

ōra 134–5

peorð 266, 268, 274, 279

pīpe 266–8

*rād-rōd 91–2

rōd 71 n. 38

rūn 224–5

scyle, pres. subj. sg. of sculan, 158

segl-rād, 239

*sigel-rād 235–6, 239, 279

‘sindrum begrunden’ 118 n. 34

snacc 105 n. 8

‘þæs strangan stapol’ 121

*sūð-rād 239

sȳ, pres. subj. sg. of bēon, 159–60, 199

tīd 39

‘tō gesecganne’ 86–7 n. 3

trēow (n.) ‘tree’ 130, 227–8, 265

trēow (f.) ‘truth’ 227–8, 234, 265

tūdor 228, 232

þel 229, 233

þorn 264

ūr, ūre 292–3, 305

wāpen 66, 137

*wāpen-hengen 75, 80, 84

wāpen-hūs 75

*wāpen-trēow 77, 80

wāpned-cynn 195

wære 228

wær-loca 195

wearg 179

wearg-trēow 61 n. 2

weg 93, 113

wiga 266 n. 34

wine-trēow 228

wirgan 178–9

wrætlic 68, 93

wrætlice 93–4

wudu 64–5

wudu-trēow 64

wulfhēafed-trēo 61 n. 2, 65, 69–70

yfel 292

yfele 299–300

INDEX OF OLD ENGLISH WORKS AND PASSAGES

I. Poetry	page(s) where reference is made
From ASPR 2: The Vercelli Book	
<i>Fates of the Apostles</i> 103–05a	302–4, 305
<i>Elene</i> 1256b–61a	297–302, 305
<i>The Dream of the Rood</i>	48, 51, 159, 230
From ASPR 3: The Exeter Book	
<i>Christ I</i>	275
<i>Christ II</i>	4–5
lines 797–801a (M 358–62a)	290
lines 804b–807a (M 365b–368a)	292–3
<i>Guthlac B</i>	296–7 n. 29
<i>The Phoenix</i>	231 n. 39
<i>Azarias</i>	293
<i>Juliana</i> 703b–709a	294–7, 305
<i>The Wanderer</i>	47, 150, 155, 205–6
lines 88–91	160
lines 94–95a	275 n. 54
<i>The Seafarer</i>	47–8, 49, 154 n. 13, 205–6, 213
line 74	159 n. 27
lines 111–12	158 n. 26
<i>Widsith</i>	47, 155
<i>Maxims I</i> 203a	299 n. 37
<i>Soul and Body</i>	297
<i>Deor</i>	213 n. 3
<i>Wulf and Eadwacer</i>	46, 49, 155, 213
Riddles	12–14, 26, 36–7, 43–9, 50–4, 56, 101–10, 139–40, 141–4, 150–1, 202–3, 213, 228 n. 56, 242, 257 n. 16, 261, 277, 286, 307–8
K–D 1–3	12 n. 6, 144 n. 1
K–D 4	144 n. 2

- K-D 7
 K-D 9
 K-D 10
 K-D 11
 K-D 12
 K-D 14
 K-D 15
 K-D 16
 K-D 17
 K-D 18
 K-D 19
 K-D 20
 K-D 21
 K-D 22
 K-D 23
 K-D 24
 K-D 25
 K-D 26
 K-D 27
 K-D 28
 K-D 29
 K-D 30
 K-D 31
 K-D 32
 K-D 35
 K-D 36
 K-D 37
 K-D 38
 K-D 39
 K-D 40
 K-D 42
 K-D 43
 K-D 47
 K-D 48
 K-D 49
 K-D 50
 K-D 51
 K-D 53
 K-D 54
 K-D 55
 K-D 56
 K-D 57
 K-D 58
 K-D 59
 K-D 60
- 110-11
 103 n. 5, 105-6 n. 11
 103 n. 5, 106 n. 11
 123
 124-5
 106 n. 11, 125, 144 n. 3
 122, 144-5 n. 4
 105
 95, 145 n. 5
 95, 145 n. 6
 105, 139, 145 n. 7, 222-4
 96, 106 n. 11, 137-9
 96, 105, 261-2
 111-12
 105
 105, 106 n. 11, 146 n. 8
 146 n. 9
 117-19, 139
 95, 125-6, 139
 95, 114-17, 122, 139
 122-3
 35, 130
 108, 146 n. 10, 267
 146 n. 11
 103 n. 5
 58, 85-9
 112, 140
 108
 103 n. 5, 147 n. 13
 103 n. 5
 99, 105, 123, 257
 108-9
 119-22, 139
 112
 106-7, 122
 107
 93-4, 126-7
 83, 147 n. 14
 106 n. 11, 122, 147 n. 15
 61-84, 96, 231
 81, 96, 123-4
 127-30
 89-92
 112
 46, 130-2, 215 n. 6, 230, 267

- K-D 64 147 n. 18
 K-D 65 106 n. 11
 K-D 66 103 n. 5, 147 n. 19
 K-D 69 112-13
 K-D 70: 1-4 147 n. 20
 K-D 70: 5-6 92-6
 K-D 73 35, 95-6, 107-8,
 K-D 74 1-23, 31-43, 45, 54-6, 95-6, 109, 122
 K-D 75/76 12 n. 6, 96-100, 122
 K-D 77 96, 106 n. 11
 K-D 78 96, 148 n. 23
 K-D 79-80 12 n. 6, 132-3, 144 n. 3, 148 n. 24
 K-D 81 108, 148 n. 25
 K-D 83 133-5
 K-D 85 108, 124
 K-D 86 87, 113
 K-D 87 112
 K-D 88 148 n. 26
 K-D 91 106 n. 11
 K-D 92 35, 135-7, 270
 K-D 93 19 n. 31, 103 n. 5, 148 n. 26
 K-D 94 103 n. 5
The Wife's Lament 4, 47, 149-67, 186-7, 193-207, 213, 248-9, 307
 verse 1a 194
 verse 15a 165-6
 lines 24-26 162-4
 lines 42-53 157-60, 199-201
The Husband's Message 23, 46, 55, 205, 209 n. 2, 213-50, 253, 279, 296, 304, 307,
 308
 line 2 227-8
 lines 6a-9a 228-9, 232-3
 verse 13b 229-30
 lines 50-54 215-21, 234-42
The Ruin 13, 46, 213 n. 3, 215 n. 6

 From ASPR 4: *Beowulf* and *Judith*
 Beowulf 55, 70, 71 n. 39, 162 n. 32, 201-2, 303
 lines 217-18 32
 lines 1912b-13 32
 verse 2446a 71 n. 39

 From ASPR 5: *Psalter* and *Boethius*
 Paris Psalter 275
 Metres of Boethius 112 n. 21, 275

From ASPR 6: Minor Poems

<i>The Rune Poem</i>	36 n. 76, 48–9, 236, 237, 251–83, 286
lines 8b–9	264
lines 10–12	258–9, 261
lines 38–40	265–6
lines 48–50	259–60
lines 51–54	268–71
lines 77–80	40–1, 264–5
lines 87–94	271–7
<i>Solomon and Saturn I</i>	221–2, 224, 278, 288, 305, 307, 309
<i>Maxims II</i>	233
The Metrical Charms	
1. For Unfruitful Land	179–80, 231
9. For Theft of Cattle	180, 210
12. Against a Wen	180

Sutton brooch inscription 210–11

II. Prose

Old English Heptateuch

Gen. 3. 14	181
Gen. 4. 11	181
Gen. 40. 22	73
Deut. 28. 15–19	169–70

Old English Version of the Gospels

Matt. 15. 22	300
--------------	-----

Ælfric

Homilies	39, 74–5, 81–3, 180–1
<i>Grammar and Glossary</i>	36, 39, 86
<i>De Temporibus Anni</i>	112 n. 21
‘Letter to Wulfsgie’	94

Wulfstan

‘Sermo Lupi ad Anglos’	304
‘De Visione Isaie Prophete’	266–7

Anonymous homilies

From MS Bodley 343	17 n. 22, 292
‘Evil Tongues’	181

Anglo-Saxon Chronicle

AD 897	283
AD 978	231 n. 40
AD 1066	33
AD 1137	178

Legal Documents

Laws	15–16 n. 18, 182, 184, 196–7, 197 n. 32
Preface to Alfred's law code	170–1
Charters	33, 173, 175–6, 185
Wills	174–5
Manumissions	176
Excommunication formulas	172–3
Book donations	176–8
Leofric's 'Exeter Book' donation	57, 58 n. 4
Benedictine Rule (Old English)	303–4

INDEX OF MODERN SCHOLARS CITED

Editors of standard modern scholarly editions are not cited here except when reference has been made to their expressed views or their special handling of the text.

- Abbott, H. H. 15 n. 16
 Abrahams, Roger D. 44 n. 101
 Acker, Paul 123 n. 46
 Adams, John F. 44 n. 102
 Aertsen, Henk 46 n. 111
 Alexander, Michael 15–16, 17, 165
 Allison, Randal S. 52 n. 125
 Anderson, Earl R. 226 n. 27
 Armstrong, Paul 28, 30, 47 n. 115, 56
 Arnold, Matthew 278
 Attenborough, F. L. 170 n. 58
- Bailey, Michael D. 182–3 n. 96
 Barley, Nigel 23, 29 n. 59, 54 n. 135
 Battles, Paul 152 n. 7
 Baum, Paull F. 15 n. 16, 19 n. 32, 114 n. 26, 116, 202 n. 139
 Belanoff, Pat 194 n. 122, 204 n. 142, 248
 Bello, Mercedes Salvador *see* Salvador Bello, Mercedes
 Ben-Amos, Dan 24 n. 48, 29 n. 59
 Bennet, Judith M. 116
 Bennett, Helen T. 199 n. 136
 Binns, Alan 233 n. 45
 Bjork, Robert E. 3 n. 4, 285 n. 1
 Blackburn, F. A. 130 n. 64, 215 n. 6
 Blakeley, L. 91 n. 16, 91 n. 17, 112 n. 21
 Blomfield, Joan 273 n. 49
 Bloomfield, Josephine 201–2
- Bloomfield, Morton 308 n. 1
 Blundell, Mary Whitlock 196 n. 130
 Bogoch, Bryna *see* Danet, Brenda
 Bolton, W. F. 154 n. 13
 Bone, Gavin 161
 Bradley, S. A. J. 119 n. 37, 154 n. 13, 160 n. 28, 165, 255, 275 n. 55, 286 n. 2
 Bragg, Lois 23 n. 46, 45 n. 106, 161, 219 n. 12, 220 n. 15, 228 n. 31, 230 n. 38
 Bray, Dorothy Ann 152–3 n. 8, 161
 Bridle, E. M. 216 n. 9, 219
 Brodeur, Arthur G. 37 n. 81
 Bronson, Bertrand Harris 224 n. 25
 Brooke, Stopford 227 n. 29
 Brooks, Kenneth R. 273 n. 49, 303 n. 50
 Brown, Carleton 291 n. 14, 296 n. 28, 301 n. 44
 Brown, George Hardin 121, 168
 Bruce-Mitford, Rupert 22 n. 43, 34–5 n. 71, 232–3 n. 45
 Brøgger, A. W. 35, 37–8
 Buchholtz, Mary, 43 n. 98
- Cain, Christopher M. 2, 10 n. 10, 222, 308 n. 1
 Calder, Daniel G. 168 n. 55
 Carr, Charles T. 75 n. 46
 Carver, Martin 183
 Cassidy, Frederic G. 149 n. 1

- Cavendish, Richard 185 n. 102
 Chadwick, H. Munro 155 n. 16, 197 n. 131
 Chadwick, N. Kershaw 155 n. 16, 161
 Chance, Jane 165, 194–5 n. 124, 163 n. 36, 164 n. 40
 Christensen, A. E. 34–5, 233 n. 45
 Clanchy, Michael T. 175 n. 70, 226 n. 28
 Clemoes, Peter 12, 227 n. 29
 Conner, Patrick W. 11 n. 1
 Conybeare, John J. 147 n. 19
 Cook, Albert S. 285 n. 1, 291 n. 14
 Crawford, Jane *see* Roberts, Jane
 Cronan, Dennis 229 n. 32
 Crossley-Holland, Kevin 15 n. 16, 16–17, 161
 Crumlin-Pedersen, Ole 34 n. 69

 Danet, Brenda, and Bryna Bogoch 173 n. 65, 175 n. 70
 Davidson, Arnold E. 46
 Davidson, Hilda Roderick Ellis 66 n. 20
 Davies, Anthony 182 n. 96
 Davies, Wendy 190
 Davis, Thomas M. 161
 Derolez, R. 221 n. 17, 223 n. 23, 251 n. 1
 Desmond, Marilyn 203 n. 140
 Dewa, Roberta J. 99–100, 104 n. 7, 238 n. 56, 257 n. 16
 Dickins, Bruce 271 n. 46
 Dietrich, Franz Eduard 18, 67 n. 23, 87 n. 6, 145 n. 5, 146 n. 10
 Doane, A. N. 9, 121 n. 41, 144 n. 2, 149, 151 n. 5, 164–5
 Dobbie, Elliott Van Kirk, *see* Krapp, George Philip
 Donoghue, Daniel 11 n. 2, 22–3, 145 n. 5
 Dronke, Peter 37 n. 82
 Dronke, Ursula 37 n. 82
 Dugaw, Dianne M. 17 n. 21
 Dundes, Alan 51

 Eliason, Norman 99, 104 n. 7
 Elliott, Ralph W. V. 240 n. 60, 243–4, 251 n. 1, 276 n. 58, 287–8, 291 n. 13, 293, 295 nn. 24–5, 296 n. 27, 298 n. 34, 302

 Erhardt-Siebold, Erika von 17 n. 22, 20, 30, 128 n. 57
 Ericksen, Janet Schrunck 137 n. 86, 230
 Evans, Angela Care 34–5 n. 71, 232–3 n. 45
 Evans-Pritchard, E. E. 189, 204

 Fell, Christine E. 131 n. 67, 295 n. 25
 Fiocco, Teresa 145 n. 4, 215 n. 7, 220 n. 15
 Fish, Stanley 27–8, 47 n. 115
 Foley, John Miles 44 n. 100
 Foucault, Michel 28–9
 Foys, Martin K. 78 n. 48
 Frank, Roberta 127 n. 54, 256 n. 12
 Frantzen, Allen J. 170 n. 58, 180 n. 88
 Frese, Dolores Warwick 285 n. 1, 293, 302
 Fry, Donald K. 18 n. 24
 Fulk, R. D. 2, 10 n. 10, 150 n. 2, 153 nn. 10–11, 158 n. 25, 161, 164 n. 40, 201, 222, 308 n. 1

 Gameson, Fiona 163
 Gameson, Richard 11 n. 1, 163
 Gates, Henry Louis 204 n. 144
 Geertz, Richard 51–2 n. 125
 Gleisner, Reinhard 202 n. 139
 Gneuss, Helmut 10
 Goldsmith, Margaret 154 n. 13
 Gordon, R. K. 165
 Gradon, P. O. E. 300 n. 41
 Green, Martin 161, 199 n. 136, 206
 Greenfield, Stanley B. 29, 127 n. 54, 147 n. 13, 160 n. 28, 164, 168 n. 55, 187, 216 n. 11, 226 n. 28
 Grein, C. W. M. 91 n. 17
 Griffith, Mark S. 105 n. 8, 145 n. 7
 Griffiths, Bill 236 n. 55, 260 n. 23, 268 n. 41
 Grundy, Lynne 178 n. 55
 Gurevich, Aron 52 n. 125

 Haarder, Andreas 1 n. 2
 Hagen, Ann 116 n. 29
 Hall, Alaric 161
 Hall, J. R. 49, 127 n. 54, 251 n., 256 n. 12, 265 n. 32, 282 n. 3
 Hall, Thomas N. 297

- Halsall, Maureen 41 n. 89, 48 n. 117, 236 n. 53, 256 n. 13, 258, 260 n. 23, 263, 264 n. 29, 266, 269, 271–2, 276 n. 59, 277, 282, 309
- Hamel, Christopher de 118 n. 34
- Hamer, Richard 161
- Hamnett, Ian 54 n. 135
- Hansen, Elaine Tuttle 48–9 n. 118
- Harbus, Antonina 147 n. 13
- Harris, Joseph 149, 150 n. 3, 152 n. 7, 210, 244 n. 69
- Hempl, G. 236 n. 53
- Hickes, George 263, 276 n. 59
- Higley, Sarah L. 49, 124 n. 49
- Hill, John 186, 195 n. 125
- Hill, Joyce 162 n. 32
- Hill, Rosalind 184 n. 99
- Hill, Thomas D. 298–9
- Hirsch, E. D., Jr 26–7, 47 n. 115
- Holland, Gary 232 n. 44
- Holland, P. 75 n. 44
- Holthausen, Ferdinand 20, 68
- Hough, Carole 151 n. 4
- Howe, Nicholas 109–10, 263
- Howlett, David R. 248
- Hrisoulas, Jim 138 n. 88
- Huizinga, Johann 50
- Irvine, Martin 48 n. 117
- Irving, Edward B., Jr 53–4
- Iser, Wolfgang 50, 56
- Johnsgard, Paul A. 25 n. 51
- Johnson, David F. 5, 104 n. 7
- Johnson, W. R. 45 n. 106
- Johnson, William C., Jr 206
- Jonasson, Frederick B. 221 n. 18
- Jordan, Richard 67–8, 73
- Kaske, Robert E. 154 n. 13, 216, 231–2 n. 43
- Kay, Christian 178 n. 78
- Kay, Donald 139
- Keefer, Sarah Larratt 111 n. 19
- Kemble, John M. 236 n. 55, 253, 277, 291
- Kennedy, Charles W. 45 n. 107, 161
- Kershaw, N. *see* Chadwick, N. Kershaw
- Kiernan, K. S. 21–2
- Kitson, Peter 20, 110 n. 17
- Kittredge, George Lyman 188
- Klaeber, Friedrich 201–2
- Klinck, Anne 13, 46, 59, 150 n. 3, 152 n. 8, 153 nn. 9 and 11, 156, 157 nn. 20–1, 160, 161, 161 n. 29, 214 n. 3, 214 n. 5, 216 n. 10, 219, 230 n. 37
- Knirck, James E. 255 n. 11
- Kock, Ernst A. 235
- Kornexl, Lucia 95 n. 26
- Krapp, George Philip 254 n. 6; and Elliott Van Kirk Dobbie, 64 n. 8, 67, 68, 71, 86 n. 1, 131 n. 66, 133 nn. 72–3, 148 n. 24, 161
- Kristeva, Julia 194, 206
- Lapidge, Michael 255 n. 8
- Lass, Roger 287–8 n. 4, 296 n. 27
- Lawrence, W. W. 161
- Lawson, Graeme 268 n. 40
- Lee, Alvin 52 n. 127
- Lench, Elinor 151 n. 4
- Lendinara, Patrizia 12 n. 4, 101 n., 104 n. 7
- Lerer, Seth 225 n. 26
- Leslie, Roy F. 157 n. 23, 161, 163 n. 36, 215 n. 6, 216 n. 9, 219, 230
- Lévi-Strauss, Claude 54 n. 134
- Lieber, Michael D. 54 n. 135
- Liebermann, Felix 67–8, 73
- Lindow, John 11 n. 1
- Little, Lester 167–8, 176 n. 71, 185 n. 100, 190, 193 n. 121, 198, 203 n. 141
- Logan, F. Donald 171 n. 60
- Longland, Stella 272 n. 47
- Luyster, Robert 152 n. 8
- Mackie, W. S. 11 n. 1
- Magennis, Hugh 3 n. 4, 70, 117
- Magoun, Francis P. 164 n. 39
- Maitland, F. W. 171, 198 n. 134
- Mandel, Jerome 161 n. 29
- Marino, Matthew 44 n. 102, 48 n. 118
- Marsden, Richard 118–19
- McDougall, David and Ian, 181 n. 89

- McGee, Timothy J. 268 n. 40
 McNulty, J. Bard 78 n. 48
 Meaney, Audrey L. 128–9 n. 59, 129 n. 62, 145 n. 4, 182 n. 96, 272 n. 48
 Meissner, Rudolph 37 n. 82
 Merrifield, Ralph 188–9
 Miller, William Ian 186, 195 n. 125
 Mitchell, Bruce 11, 38 n. 84, 119 n. 38, 161–2
 Mitchell, Stephen A. 209 n. 1
 Moltke, Erik 210
 Muir, Bernard J. 13 n. 9, 58–9, 61–2, 64 n. 8, 86, 87 n. 3, 93, 97 n. 33, 104 n. 7, 106 n. 12, 114 n. 24, 121 n. 42, 128, 131 n. 67, 133 nn. 72–3, 144 n. 2, 145 n. 6, 146 n. 8, 147 n. 20, 148 n. 24, 161 n. 29, 162 n. 34, 215 n. 6, 216, 219, 238, 290 n. 11, 293 n. 21
 Müller, Eduard 23 n. 46
 Myers, K. Sara 191 n. 118
- Nelson, Marie 45, 49–50
 Newlands, Carole 191 n. 118
 Nicholson, Peter 236, 239, 260 n. 24, 277
 Niles, John D. 6 n. 6, 15 n. 15, 195 n. 125, 235 n. 50
 North, Richard 47 n. 116
- O'Brien O'Keeffe, Katherine 221 n. 18, 222 n. 19
 Ó Carragáin, Éamonn 299 n. 38
 Ó Cathasaigh, Tomás 190 n. 116
 Obermeier, Anita 3 n. 4
 Ogden, Daniel 188 n. 111
 Olsen, Alexandra Hennessy 46
 Ong, Walter J. 51 n. 124
 Opland, Jeff 204–5 n. 147
 Orchard, Andy 11 n. 1, 45, 101 n.
 Orton, P. R. 152 nn. 7–8, 210, 238
 Osborn, Marijane 145 n. 5, 260 n. 24, 272 n. 47, 277, 283 n. 5
- Page, Raymond I. 104 n. 7, 137 n. 86, 136, 211 n. 6, 216 n. 8, 221 n. 18, 223 nn. 22–3, 224–5, 229–30, 252–3 n. 3, 255 n. 11, 256 n. 13, 258 n. 17, 268, 274–5 n. 52, 285 n. 1, 290–1, 293, 298, 301, 302, 303 n. 49, 305 n. 52
- Palomé, E., 256 n. 13
 Parkes, M. B. 286 n. 2
 Parks, Ward 44 n. 100
 Parsons, David N. 256 n. 14, 278, 303 n. 49
 Pasternack, Carol Braun 1 n. 1, 27 n. 53
 Percy, Thomas 223–4
 Pinsker, Hans, and Waltraud Ziegler 11 n. 1, 15 n. 16, 62, 65 n. 15, 69 n. 29, 147 n. 20
 Pitman, J. H. 18
 Plummer, Charles 190 n. 116
 Pollock, Frederick 171, 198 n. 116
 Pondrom, Cyrena 102 n. 3
 Poole, Russell 308 n. 1
 Pope, John C. 85, 92–3, 161, 214 n. 5
 Pulsiano, Phillip 168 n. 55
- Raffel, Burton 165–6
 Redfield, Robert 51 n. 125
 Renoir, Alain 154, 162 n. 32, 249 n. 75
 Ricoeur, Paul 42–3, 47 n. 115
 Ringler, Richard N. 149 n. 1
 Risannen, Matti 150 n. 3
 Roberts, Jane 178 n. 78, 182 nn. 94–5 (= Jane Crawford)
 Robertson, A. J. 175 n. 71
 Robinson, Fred C. 11, 119 n. 38, 127 n. 54, 161–2, 203 n. 140
 Roeder, Fritz 164–5
 Roemer, Danielle M. 100 n. 1
 Rosier, James L. 168 n. 55
 Ross, Margaret Clunies 258 n. 17
 Rumble, Alexander 11 n. 1, 57–8
 Russom, Geoffrey 119 n. 38, 120 n. 39, 121 n. 42
- Salvador Bello, Mercedes 20, 22, 96, 101 n., 122 n. 45, 144 n. 1, 148 n. 23
 Sauer, Hans 173 n. 64
 Sayre, Henry M. 102 n. 4
 Schücking, Levin L. 158 n. 25
 Scragg, Donald G. 9, 11 n. 1, 290 n. 10
 Sedgfield, W. 220 n. 15
 Senra Silva, Immaculada 251 n.
 Shetelig, Haakon 35, 37–8
 Shippey, T. A. 255, 308 n. 1

- Shook, Laurence K. 94, 102 n. 2, 117, 118 nn. 34–35
- Short, Douglas D. 161
- Sisam, Kenneth 244 n. 68, 286 n. 2, 295 n. 25
- Sorrell, Paul 32 n. 61, 41
- Spitzer, Leo 30
- Stanley, Eric G. 45 n. 106, 54 n. 133, 69 n. 29, 127 n. 54, 211 n. 6
- Stewart, Ann Harleman 144 n. 2
- Stewart, Susan 223
- Stock, Brian 203–4 n. 142, 253
- Stodnick, Jacqueline A. 289
- Stoklund, Marie 255 n. 11
- Straus, Barrie Ruth 166
- Svärdström, Elizabeth 255 n. 11
- Swan, Mary 1 n. 1
- Swanton, M. J. 154 n. 13
- Taylor, Archer 41–2, 87 n. 7, 88
- Taylor, Keith P. 62, 69–70
- Thomas, Keith 187–8
- Thornbury, E. V. 211 n. 6
- Thorpe, Benjamin 11 n. 1, 15 n. 16, 47, 66, 99, 203, 291 nn. 12 and 14
- Tigges, Wim 49 n. 118, 52, 53
- Trautmann, Moritz 11 n. 1, 19, 31, 36, 67 n. 23, 85, 87 n. 6, 88, 102 n. 2, 104 n. 6, 107 n. 13, 108, 126 n. 52, 130 n. 64, 148 n. 25, 216 n. 9, 248, 254, 285 n. 1, 295 nn. 24–5, 296, 305 n. 54
- Treharne, E. M. 171–2, 184 n. 99
- Tupper, Frederick 11 n. 1, 14 n. 13, 19, 37, 40, 52, 56, 61 n. 2, 68–9, 87 n. 5, 87 n. 8, 88 n. 10, 104 n. 6, 114 n. 25, 136 n. 82, 136 n. 84, 138 n. 90, 213 n. 2, 288, 296 n. 27
- Vinner, Max 34 n. 69
- Wagner, Peter 34 n. 69
- Walker-Pelkey, Faye 47, 151 n. 4
- Walz, John A. 18
- Wanley, Humphrey 58 n. 4, 177
- Ward, J. A. 164 n. 39
- Watson, Lindsay 191 n. 118
- Webster, Jane Carson 41 n. 90
- Webster, Leslie 230 n. 34
- Wentersdorf, Karl P. 37–8 n. 84, 47, 156, 161
- Whitelock, Dorothy 186 n. 103, 301 n. 43
- Whitman, F. H. 11 n. 1, 21–2, 45, 53, 95
- Wilcox, Jonathan 83, 87 n. 8, 97 n. 33, 101 n., 110 n. 16, 128 n. 57, 129 n. 59, 145 n. 5, 146 n. 9, 147 n. 14
- Wilson, David M. 79
- Wilson, Jacqui 81 n. 51
- Williams, Gareth D. 192 n. 119
- Williamson, Craig 12–13 n. 6, 15 n. 16, 16–17, 22, 36 n. 76, 43 n. 99, 44–5 n. 103, 61 n. 2, 62, 69, 85, 86 nn. 1 and 3, 87 nn. 5–6, 88 n. 10, 91, 93, 97, 104 n. 7, 106 n. 12, 110 n. 18, 112 n. 22, 113, 114, 124–5, 127 n. 53, 128, 130 n. 64, 131 n. 67, 132 n. 70, 133 nn. 72–3, 134, 138, 144 n. 3, 146 n. 8, 147 nn. 19–20, 148 n. 24, 202 n. 139, 223 n. 22, 240 n. 60, 267 n. 38, 270 n. 45
- Woolf, Rosemary 295 n. 25
- Wormald, Patrick 2 n. 3, 171, 175 n. 70
- Wrenn, C. L. 252 n. 2
- Wyatt, Alfred J. 11 n. 1, 67 n. 23, 87, 135
- Ziegler, Waltraud *see* Pinsker, Hans

GENERAL INDEX

- Alliterative doublets as riddle solutions 99–100, 108, 122–7
- Anglo-Saxon studies: Humphrey Wanley 58 n. 4, 177; interdisciplinarity of 6; nineteenth-century German scholarship 8. *See also* Editorial principles; Index of Modern Scholars Cited (pp. 319–23).
- Art, Anglo-Saxon: Bayeux tapestry 78; decorative arts 66, 67–8, 70, 270; illuminated Gospel books and psalters 119; illustrated Hexateuch 71–3; labours of the months 41 n. 90; Sutton brooch 210–11
- Audience (of OE poetry): clerical 2–3; connoisseurs 4; implied 51 n. 124, 65; multiple 3; secular 3. *See also* Orality and textuality; Reading.
- Aural effects 139–40; alliteration 45; onomatopoeia 128; rhyme 115
- Authors, Anglo-Saxon: Ælfric 10, 39, 74, 81–3, 112 n. 21, 180–1; Alfred the Great 170–1, 182; Bede 181; *Beowulf* poet 1, 303, 310; Byrhtferth of Ramsey 260 n. 23; Cynewulf 1, 243–4, 279, 285–306, 309–10; Rune-poet 253, 260–1, 277, 281, 310; Wulfstan 266–8, 304. *See also* Index of Old English Works and Passages (pp. 313–17).
- Authors, classical: Empedocles 20; Homer 155, 191; Ovid 191–2; Pliny 18; Propertius 191 n.
- Authors, modern: Emily Dickinson 24–6, 30, 56; Maxine Hong Kingston 1; Anne Michaels 42; George Bernard Shaw 247; Gertrude Stein 102; Leo Tolstoy 245–7
- Authors and works, Medieval Latin: Aldhelm 18, 41, 87–8, 103 n. 5; Regino of Prüm 172; Symphosius 124 n. 48, 87, 131–2; Benedictine Rule 138; encyclopedic literature 96; penitentials 180 n. 88; *Regularis Concordia* 95. *See also* Bible.
- Authors and works, Middle English: Geoffrey Chaucer 196, 250, 267; William Langland 137 n. 87; *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* 34
- Authors and works, Old Irish: *Buile Suibhne* 190–1
- Authors and works, Old Norse: *Hervarar Saga* 17; *Sigrdrífumál* 244–5; *Skírnismál* 152 nn. 7–8, 191, 209–10; Snorri Sturluson, *Skáldskaparmál* 37; Old Icelandic and Old Norwegian rune poems 257–8, 259–60 n. 23
- Authorship (of OE poetry): anonymous 1, 26–7; elusive nature of, 2, 26–7; possibly female 203
- Bible 117–18, 167–71; Deuteronomy 168–70, 173; Ecclesiasticus 181 n. 89; Exodus 168, 182; Genesis 181; Gospel of Matthew 296, 304; Psalms 121, 167–8, 171; as proposed riddle solution, 117–18. *See also* Gospel books; Psalters.

Charters, 33, 173, 175–6, 183, 185, 264 n. 29, 274

Christian themes in Anglo-Saxon literature 3, 108–9, 147 n. 19, 144 n. 1, 154–5, 259–60, 263, 276, 290–306; attitude towards cursing 179–81, 203; attitude towards drunkenness 117; cross as means of salvation 61–2, 67–9, 70–3, 81, 147 n. 14, 301; Doomsday 290–2, 294–7; typology 110–11. *See also* Bible; Church, Anglo-Saxon; Critical methods: exegetical criticism; Cursing; in liturgy; Excommunication; Gospel books; Psalters.

Church, Anglo-Saxon 61–2, 67–9, 70–3, 81; Benedictine Reform of 95; secular qualities of 2–3; celibacy of clergy 138; clergy versus laity 2–3; clerical education 121–2, 168

Comparative method 189–90, 204–5, 244–7; in riddle-solving 40–2

Critical methods: allegoresis 154 n. 13; anthropological approaches 51–2; critical assumptions (need to question), 7, 28, 47 n. 115, 243–4, 251–3, 276 n. 58, 279, 286 n., 288, 305; contextualism 7, 30; deconstruction 27; exegetical criticism 21–2, 29, 37 n. 81, 69; folkloric methods 43 n. 99; game theory 4, 50, 56; intersubjectivity 28, 56; phenomenology 28, 48; practical principles of criticism 6–7, 29–31; reader-reception theory 27; relativism 27, 47 n. 115. *See also* Comparative method; Hermeneutics; Riddling; criteria for solving riddles.

Cryptography 3, 104–5, 253, 287, 294; in Riddle 19, 222–3; in Riddle 36, 96–100; in Riddle 42, 257; in Riddle 55, 68; in Riddle 58, 85–6, 89–92; in Riddle 64, 147 n. 18; in Riddle 75/76, 104–5; in *Solomon and Saturn I* 21–2. *See also* Cynewulf's runic signatures; *Husband's Message*; Runes; *Rune Poem*.

Cursing 161–207; in ancient Rome 188, 191–2; in Anglo-Saxon England 167–87; in Celtic areas 190–1; in Old Norse

209–10; in post-Conquest England 187–8; among the Azande 189–90; sanctioned by Bible 167–71, 173, 181; arises from loss of honour 190–3; in legal documents 173–6; as literary phenomenon 191–3; in liturgy 167–8, 171–3, 184; moral ambiguity of 179–81, 203; associated with paganism 190, 198; as recourse of the powerless 193; rhetoric of 170, 175–6; vocabulary of 178–9; associated with women 179–80, 193. *See also* Excommunication.

Cynewulf's runic signatures 255, 290–306, 309; in *Christ II* 290–7; in *Elene* 297–302; in *Fates of the Apostles* 302–4; in *Juliana* 294–7

Diction: cursing 178–9; formulaic language 50, 63; gender-neutral terms 158, 159, 199; ghost words 266, 272–3, 274–5, 281; Old Icelandic cognates to OE words: *askr* 283, *hlynr* 66, *kjöll* 233, *laukr* 146, *snekkja* 105 n. 8, *pili* 229; vocables 272–3, 274–5. *See also* Kenning; Index of Old English Words and Phrases Discussed (pp. 311–12).

Doublets as riddle solutions 35–8, 108–9, 114, 122–3, 147 n. 54. *See also* Alliterative doublets as riddle solutions.

Drinking: conducive to crime 69; dangers of overindulgence 116–17, 126; symbol of social cohesion 70. *See also* Food and drink.

Editorial principles, 220–1, 222–3, 234–5 n. 50, 258 n. 19, 305–6; editorial emendations 69 n. 29, 70 n. 35, 170 n.; editorial handling of runes 58–9; editorial practices adopted in this book 9–10; editorial punctuation 38–9, 64 n. 8

Excommunication 171–5, 178, 184, 197

Exeter Book 4, 6, 49, 57, 58, 205; burn-hole in 35, 133, 135, 214, 228; compiler of 13, 48; date of 11 n. 1; donated to Exeter Cathedral 57–8; leaves lost in 92 n. 18, 109; organization of 12–13, 151 n. 4, 250.

- Exeter Book elegies 4, 199 n., 213, 309; compared to Old Norse elegies 150 n. 3; riddle-like 13, 46–7. *See also* *Husband's Message*, *Wife's Lament*.
- Exeter Book riddles 12, 14, 17, 53–4, 56, 91–2, 101; answered best in Old English 36, 92, 101–3, 109, 113, 139–40; anthropocentric 54; anti-heroic 69 n. 29; expressive of emotions 45, 53; imagery of 52–3, 116; possible Latin answers for 103 n. 5, 112; as microcosm of OE poetry 4, 12 n. 4, 44–6, 51, 310; numeration of, 12–13 n. 6; occur in pairs 95–6; pose a linguistic challenge 101, 103; window on social life 52–3. *See also* Riddling; Riddle solutions.
- Food and drink: ale 114–17; bread 107; butter 147; mead 125–30; onion 106 n. 11, 146 n. 9; wine 78, 123. *See also* Drinking; Riddle solutions: manufacturing processes.
- Gallows 65–84, 147 n. 14; 'gallows humour' 84
- Gender 14, 17, 193–5, 204 n. 142, 205, 207, 248; gender biases in scholarship 37–8, 201–2; gender and cursing 179, 193; gender-neutral words 158, 159, 199; gendered sense of time 199 n. 136; gender and witchcraft 182–3. *See also* Grammatical gender.
- Genre 307; of Exeter Book poems 13, 46–8; generic expectations 30
- Gnomic voice 160, 199
- Gospel books 119, 177, 270
- Grammar 185, 200–1; indicative versus subjunctive mood 158–9, 175 n. 69, 199, 215 n. 7; past versus pluperfect tense 38 n. 84; present versus future tense 159–60, 199; singular versus plural number, 17–18, 43, 66. *See also* Grammatical gender.
- Grammatical gender 36–7, 42, 43, 97, 104 n. 6, 151, 273 n. 50; as a clue to riddle solutions 105–9, 146 n. 10
- Hermeneutics 254–5, 276, 277–8, 286, 306; 'hermeneutical circle' 42–3, 47, 51. *See also* Critical methods; Meaning; Validity in interpretation.
- Husband's Message* 213–50, 279; compared to *Wife's Lament* 247–50; use of initialisms in 238–42; manuscript context of 213–14 n. 3, 248; runes embedded in 215–21, 234–42; speaker's identity in 225–34; textual difficulties of 214–21, 215 n. 6
- Initialisms 238–42, 246, 254, 258, 261, 286–7, 290–306. *See also* Cynewulf's runic signatures; *Husband's Message*; *Rune Poem*.
- Instrumental music 266–8. *See also* Riddle solutions (under *domestic items*): bagpipes, drinking horn (war horn), reed flute.
- Kennings 263, 296; woman kennings 37 n. 81; sea kennings 239, 263, 265; ship kennings 37 n. 82, 147 n. 18, 263
- Language 102–3, 248; and nationality 57; and semantic shift 111–12. *See also* Diction.
- Laws, Anglo-Saxon 15–16 n. 18, 134, 170–1, 182–4, 197; oral residue in 175 n. 70. *See also* Charters; Manumissions; Wills.
- Leofric, Bishop of Exeter 57–8, 177
- Liturgy: *See* Bible; Church, Anglo-Saxon; Cursing; in liturgy; Excommunication.
- Manumissions 176
- Manuscript culture 1–2, 13 n. 10; glossing of manuscripts 86, 168 n. 55; palaeography 58; use of pumice 118; possible scribal mistakes 98–100, 214–15, 252 n. 2, 288–9. *See also* Cryptography; Orality and textuality; Runes.
- Meaning (in literary works): located in authorial intention 26–7; in the individual reader 27; in an interpretive community 27, 56

Natural creatures: barnacle goose 22–23; horse 111; hummingbird 25; swan 20, 110–11. *See also* Riddle solutions: animals, birds, natural things, trees; Trees.

Nature and culture 54

Orality and textuality 3, 44, 168, 172–3, 175–6, 253, 285–6; bilingual textuality 168, 172; textual communities 107, 203–4, 253; vernacular textuality 57, 172–3. *See also* Manuscript culture; Reading; Speech acts; Voice.

Paronomasia 47–8, 127 n. 54; on *asc* 35, 108, 283; on *bōc* 135–7, 269–71; on *feþer* 126; on *hrēod* 131; on *horn* 12; on *ōra* 134–5; on *ōs* 258–9; on *trēow* 130, 227–8, 234, 264; on *wāpen* 137–9; on *weg* 113 n. 23; a possible visual pun 98–9

Poetry 307; formalized structures of 50; pleasures of reading 56. *See also* Poetry, Old English.

Poetry, Old English 1–5, 12, 289–90; anonymity of 1, 26, 309–10; dating of 2, 252 n. 3, 288; ludic qualities of 4–5, 49–50, 255–6; OE term for 194; riddle-like qualities of 4–5, 48–9. *See also* Cynewulf's runic signatures; Exeter Book elegies; Exeter Book riddles; *Husband's Message*; *Rune Poem*; *Wife's Lament*.

Prose, Old English 5–6, 9–10. *See also* Charters; Laws; Manumissions; Sermons; Saints' lives; Wills.

Proverbs 196

Psalters 119, 121–2, 168 n. 55, 270

Puns. *See* Paronomasia.

Reading 3, 286; active role of reader 4–5, 25–6; need for close reading 6–7

Rhetoric and style: ambiguity 203–4, 204–5; archaisms 221–4; classical figures of rhetoric 45; defamiliarization 31, 62, 95, 116, 215–16 n. 8, 221–3, 274; dramatic monologue 4, 150, 205, 214; first-person address 14, 35, 45, 211, 213; irony 115, 134, 138, 249,

263; metaphor 12, 14, 25, 30, 32, 33, 37, 40, 45, 62, 73, 87, 93–4, 95, etc.; neologisms 243; paradox 14, 23, 30, 36, 45, 119 n. 38, 122 n. 44, 263, 265, 270–1; personification 25, 31, 36, 38, 45, 53–4, 93, 94, 230, 243, 263–4, 273; prosopopoeia 211, 230; rhetoric of persuasion 226, 234 n. 49; synecdoche 37 n. 82, 41, 126, 265. *See also* Kennings.

Riddle solutions: *animals*: bullock 112; cock and hen 105, 123, 257; crab 148 n. 23; fish (and flood) 108, 124; fox (and hound) 122, 144–5 n. 4; hound and hind 99–100; maggot 120–1; ox (and ox hide) 124–5; ox (and ox-horn) 125; oyster 106 n. 11; *birds*: barnacle goose 106 n. 11; cock and hen 123; crows 128–30; cuckoo 105–6 n. 11; magpie (?) 106 n. 11, 146 n. 8; swan 110–11; *celestial elements*: the Plough (the Big Dipper) 111–12; sun and moon 122–3; storm-wind 144 n. 1; *domestic items*: bagpipes 146 n. 10, 267; bee-hive 145 n. 5; bucket 106, 144 n. 2; churn 106 n. 11, 147 n. 15; drinking horn (or war horn) 106 n. 11, 144 n. 3; jug or other vessel 145 n. 6; key 106 n. 11; loom 81–2, 123–34; oven 107; plough 105; reed flute 131, 267; shirt 106; weather vane 108, 148 n. 25; well sweep 89–91; *liturgical objects*: bell 147 n. 20; candle 93–6; paten and calyx 103 n. 5, 112; *natural things*: barley 115–16; fire 107; ice 113; reed or clump of reeds 131; *manufacturing processes*: baking 107; book production 117–18; brewing 114–16; mead production 125; smelting 134–5; *riddles of the scriptorium*: bookworm and psalter 119–22; candle 93–4; Gospel book 117–19; ink well 148 n. 26; pen and fingers 126–7; *ships*: 32–5, 147 n. 18; cargo vessel 146 n. 7; light warship 105, 145 n. 7; *trees*: ash 35; beech 35, 135–7; oak 33–5, 109; *trēow* 35, 130; *weapons*: 83; bow 105; quiver 145 n. 5; spear 107; sword 106 n. 11, 137–9; weapon-rack 75–8, 83

Riddle solutions (rejected): hedgehog (for Riddle 15) 144–5 n. 4; ballista (for Riddle

- 17) 145 n. 5; jay (for Riddle 24) 146 n. 8; ship (for Riddle 36), 87, 89; battering ram (for Riddle 53) 147 n. 14; mead-barrel and drinking bowl, cross, Eucharist (for Riddle 55) 61–9; swallows, jackdaws, swifts, demons, etc. (for Riddle 57) 128–9; byrnie (for Riddle 61) 106; lyre or harp (for Riddle 70: 1–4) 147 n. 20; lighthouse (for Riddle 70: 5–6) 93–4; cuttlefish, water, siren, swan, soul, writing (or quill pen), sea-eagle, ship's figurehead, barnacle goose (for Riddle 74) 18–23; urine (for Riddle 75/76) 97
- Riddle types: 'mock-riddles' 87 n. 8, 'monster' riddles 87–8; 'riddles of the scriptorium' 21, 94, 117–22, 126–7, 148 n. 26; sexually risqué riddles 123, 137–9, 202–3; transformation riddles 17, 31–2, 35–6, 40–1, 136, 148 n. 26
- Riddling 14, 25, 49, 51, 54, 243, 308; criteria for solving riddles 29–31, 39–40, 242; literary riddling 24–6, 50; oral or social riddling 23–4, 29 n. 59, 41–2, 50, 87–8, 95. *See also* Exeter Book riddles.
- Rune names 256–79; obscurity of 236, 251–3; stability or instability of 256–8
- Rune Poem* 48 n. 117, 49, 236, 251–83, 309; lost manuscript of 262–3; playful character of 262–5; riddle-like 40–1, 261–3, 277; names of runes in: **A**-rune 264–5, **Æ**-rune 282–3, **B**-rune 268–71, 277, **EA**-rune 271–2, 274–7, **H**-rune 263, **IE**-rune 271–4, 277; **O**-rune 258–9, 277; **P**-rune 265–8, 277; **S**-rune 260 n. 24, 277; **T**-rune 259–60, 277; **Þ** rune 263–4; **W**-rune 276 n. 59; **Y** rune 276 n. 59. *See also* Authors, Anglo-Saxon: Rune-poet; Cryptography; Initialisms; Runes.
- Runes 40–1, 215–21, 234–42, 251–79; archaic quality 289; used as display script 221–2; in Exeter Book 58; on Franks Casket 100; associated with magic 225, 235, 245, 247–8; used in place of Roman letters 221–3, 294; *rúnakefli* (rune sticks) 136–7, 229–30; rune-lists 252 n. 3, 266, 268, 274; rune-staves (runic letters) 91–2, 210, 222–3, 243–4, 278–9; carved on ships 232–4, 245. *See also* Cryptography; Cynewulf's runic signatures; *Husband's Message*; Initialisms; *Rune Poem*.
- Saints' lives 74–5, 81–3, 303
- Sermons 39, 74–5, 81–3, 180–1, 266–7, 304
- Ships 31–3, 37–8, 174, 229, 283; architecture of 232–3; construction of 34–5
- Social history 173, 264, 267, 268 n. 40; capital punishment 84 n. 54, 182–4; corporal punishment 134; exile 197; female exogamy 152; legal protection 196–7; marriage duties 196–7; marriage vows 163, 195, 207, 226–8, 235; outlawry 61 n. 2, 65, 171–2; vengeance and feud settlements 186–7, 195–8. *See also* Riddle solutions: domestic objects; Drinking; Food and drink; Instrumental music; Laws, Anglo-Saxon; Manumissions.
- Speech acts 166, 172, 175, 180. *See also* Orality and textuality.
- Transformation 263, 264–5, 282–3. *See also* Riddle types: transformation riddles.
- Translation, as act of interpretation 14–15, 200–1
- Trees 40–1, 64, 136; apple 33; ash 263, 282–3; beech 269–71; birch 268–83; hazel 33; linden 66; maple 66; oak 33, 264–5; poplar 271 n. 46; hawthorn 33, 264; willow 33; yew 263. *See also* Riddle solutions: trees.
- Validity in interpretation 5, 12, 26–31, 32, 289. *See also* Hermeneutics; Meaning; Riddling: criteria for solving riddles.
- Voice 14, 234, 236–8; as a fiction of textuality 44, 50–1. *See also* Orality and textuality.
- Weapons 66, 69, 70–1, 78–80; byrnie 75, 78–80; military cart 77–80, 83; sword 66. *See also* Riddle solutions: weapons.

Wife's Lament 149–207, 210; Christian elements 154–5, 198 n. 135; concluding curse 193–207; *dramatis personae* 153; enigmatic qualities 150–4; gloomy physical setting 152 n. 7, 210; identity of speaker 151–3, 206; manuscript context 151 n. 4, 205; plot 156–7; sources and analogues 152–3 n. 8, 162; temporal setting 155–6, 187, 206–8; textual problems in 157–67

Wills 174–5

Wisdom literature, 49, 109, 298, 307–8, 310

Witchcraft 182–4, 210–11

Wooden objects 66, 265; made of oak 34; made of oak, yew, maple, and holly 66, 68, 80–1; speak in own voice 228. *See also* Gallows; Riddle solutions (various); Ships.

World view 12, 51–2, 55, 309; Anglo-Saxon world view 52–5

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